**Drying on the Steps**

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/43556170.

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|---|---|
| Rating: | Explicit |
| Archive Warning: | Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings |
| Category: | M/M |
| Fandom: | OMORI (Video Game) |
| Relationships: | Basil/Sunny (OMORI), Basil & Polly (OMORI), Aubrey & Hero & Kel (OMORI) |
| Characters: | Basil (OMORI), Sunny (OMORI), Aubrey (OMORI), Kel (OMORI), Hero (OMORI), Polly (OMORI), Kim (OMORI) |
| Additional Tags: | Snowed In, Blood and Injury, Panic Attacks, Fluff and Angst, Trapped, Psychological Trauma, Sunflower, Basil/Sunny-centric (OMORI), Unhealthy Coping Mechanisms, Slow Burn, Implied/Referenced Suicide, Vomiting, Self-Harm, Post-Good Ending (OMORI), Mystery, Suicide Attempt, Eventual Fluff, Sleep Deprivation, Sharing a Bed, Distrust, Touchy-Feely, Mental Breakdown, Hallucinations |
| Language: | English |
| Stats: | Published: 2022-12-31 Updated: 2024-07-08 Words: 282,809 Chapters: 72/? |

# Drying on the Steps

by DeepFriedBasil

Summary

Shortly after the events in the hospital, Sunny and Basil wake up in the back of an unmarked vehicle with no memory of how the two of them arrived there. They must take shelter in the shadowed halls of a seemingly-empty building in order to escape a growing snowstorm. **Sunny and Basil have no choice other than to work through their shared trauma, but they're going to have to do it while trapped alone together.**

# Basil Wakes

Chapter Notes

*This story alternates asymmetrically between Basil and Sunny's POV, starting with the gardener. The first two chapters contain the most setup. Sunflower content increases in intensity and frequency as the story continues. Other characters become relevant only after Chapter 17.*

I also want to note that, as absurd as it is, the setting of this story is NOT supernatural or post-apocalyptic, and it's not 'all a dream' in the end.

**WARNING: This story only contains only one additional content warning, and this is it:**

*Hello!*

I wasn't sure if I'd have to redo this intro again, but some prolonged conversations in my comments about how Ao3's tagging system works/should work have led me to believe that simply including a pinned explanation of the potential misunderstanding at hand would be ideal.

*Here's the gist:*

On this (accursed) site, many well-meaning artists will use the "may contain explicit content" flag as a **placeholder** tag because they themselves are not entirely sure of what kind of content their story will contain while it is still mid-production, which is **not** a dishonest usage of the tag, but over time it has become so common as to be conflated with the **intended** usage.

When some of us read media that may contain an instance of highly graphic content, we prefer to be left entirely unaware. I would have never experienced some of my favorite pieces of art had I known the content within them ahead of time. Despite going through some unfortunate traumatic experiences in my life, I still feel that way about all artistic content.

The point of the “no archive warnings” tag is to allow users to warn readers about disturbing content, without directly specifying what that content is- *which is why understanding what those categories **are** is extremely important.*
I have had multiple instances of users admitting to me through this fic that they had no idea what the "adult content" flag actually referred to in literal terms, as they had never actually read those labels themselves. This story may contain content from every single one of those categories, or it may contain none of that content at all.

Detailing the dozen-or-so reasons for using said tag are far beyond the scope of this note. This particular type of story is far more vulnerable to spoilers than most, as well as murky in the way different users will interpret its content.

Regardless, if one clicks on a box that underlines that they understand and accept the story they are about to read may contain an item from of Ao3's explicit content list, then they cannot reasonably turn around and take issue if a story contains exactly that. I want everyone on this site to remain safe, but I cannot take responsibility for the actions of my readers.

Most "unspecified warning" stories on Ao3 are genuinely clean, and that has unfortunately led a lot of (especially younger) readers on this site to see the warning as ONLY indicative of an absence of labels, rather than a label itself.

The last thing I want is for anyone to relive anything traumatic from their own life because they clicked "I understand" on a content warning out of habit.

If you personally believe that all sensitive content should always be flagged as specifically as possible then I more than encourage you to engage in that discussion with your fellow Ao3 members (it's an important dialogue regardless of your stance), but please try not to do it here.

**Final note**: *Nothing in this story was written with the intention of justifying or normalizing truly horrendous physical or mental experiences.*

*Understand and proceed at your own risk.*

*(Also have a great day)*

Basil woke up in what initially appeared to be a small hallway.

It was extremely dark, the walls lit only by a pair of tiny LEDs on the ceiling that painted the space in a weak orange glow. He quietly laid in that space for a moment, watching a moth mindlessly flapping itself back and forth in the dim light.

Slowly coming to his senses, Basil reached up to rub his eyes. He regretted doing so almost immediately, having forgotten about the massive bruise on his face that was still far from finished healing. Sunny had done considerable damage to his eye, but it was nothing compared to what Basil had stolen in return.

*Basil could still see every detail of his friend's terrified expression, blood pouring out from the puncture he had made. Each night, in his dreams, the horrid display Basil created had played out over and over, tormenting him. No matter what he did, Basil couldn't stop himself from hearing the sound of Sunny's head hitting the floor.*

*thud.*

Please stop.

*thud.*

I'm so sorry, Sunny.

*thud.*

No more. Please.

*thud.*

With the sudden jolt of pain shaking him awake, Basil started to take notice of his surroundings.

*Wait, where was he again? Why was he sleeping in a hallway?*

**Not a hallway**. *It was a sort of vehicle, maybe?* Basil figured from the shape, as well as the loud sound of the wind outside, that he had to be in the back of some kind of truck.

**Was this an ambulance?** Maybe he had taken a turn for the worse and the doctors needed to rush him somewhere else. *But were his injuries really that bad? What about Sunny?*

*The cuts on Basil's face stung.*

Basil pushed a large blanket off himself, immediately feeling the cold air biting at the bandaged wound on his abdomen. He shivered and sucked air in through his teeth, trying his best to ignore the sudden pain. It was **much** too cold in here. Basil stood up.

He had been lying on a slightly dusty mattress that was spread out on the floor. There was no space to walk anywhere else, so Basil teetered back and forth on his feet as he tried to keep his balance while moving across the soft mattress springs.

It was admittedly rather difficult. The blonde had been told not to move around while he was staying at the hospital and subsequently hadn't walked very much for a long time. Basil awkwardly hobbled towards the end of the truck where the large metal sliding door had been closed shut. **Definitely not an ambulance.**

Basil pulled up on the bottom of the door for a moment or two, but didn't see himself making any progress. It looked as if he was locked in here.

*Basil swallowed. He could hear the wind blowing violently outside, making the sides of the truck shake constantly.*

Maybe he was being taken to a mental institution? That must have been why he was locked in here and why he couldn't remember anything. They must have drugged him and sent him away while unconscious so that he couldn't fight back. *Not that he would have.*

This was it. They had finally removed him from the hospital and shipped him somewhere he couldn't hurt anyone else.

Basil's shoulders relaxed slightly. *This was what he deserved, wasn't it?* He was finally getting punished for what he did. Someone or something had taken him away to punish him for everything he had done. All things considered, they would probably throw him in a padded room and forget him there.

A soft little prison filled with nothing, fit for nobody but himself. *He had earned it.*

Basil smiled to himself weakly, feeling somber tears welling up in his eyes. He rested against the wall, letting his shoulders rub against the side of the truck as he slowly slid back to the floor.

*This was it. It had been a long time coming.*

…

*But even still, couldn't…*

…

*… couldn't they at least have let him say goodbye first?*

*Basil squeezed his eyes shut, tears rolling silently down his face as he wept alone in the dark. He listened to the wind scream against the metal walls of the truck. Every sound just seemed to condemn him further. Basil clutched his arms as his body ached. Tears fell at his feet.*

When Basil finally opened his eyes again, he resumed emotionlessly watching the moth as it continued frantically beating itself against the walls. The insect slowly began to drift towards the front of the vehicle.

Basil gazed towards the opposite end of the truck as the moth's shape started to fade into the inky darkness. Shadowy tendrils appeared to seep from the corners of Basil's mind, growing eerily from the piles of blankets he had crawled out of moments before. He imagined monstrous shapes and faces emerging from the blankets in the dark, watching him with hateful intent as he shivered against a cold metal wall.

Basil took a deep breath and tried to calm himself down. What he was seeing was just in his head. It was just him tormenting himself.

None of it was rea-

…

*There was something breathing in the corner.*

No…

There was some**one** breathing in the corner.

*Basil felt a chill run through every bone in his body.*

*In the back corner of this metal room, someone had been sleeping behind him.*

Wrapped in a dark grey blanket, Basil could just barely make out the shape of a person's head, their face turned towards the wall.

***Someone else was in here with him***.

Basil took a step closer, barely able to breathe. The blonde felt almost completely consumed by fear.

*It wouldn't be.*

The person's hair was dark. It blended into the shadows well, making the outline of their head even harder to make out.

*It couldn't be.*

Basil crept closer.

*Basil was close enough now that he could now see a bandage that had been wrapped tightly around the side of the person's h-*

…

A bandage that had been earned after a fight. A bandage meant to conceal an empty socket that would remain empty forever.

*Basil felt like he was going to scream.*

***Why?*** *Why was Sunny here?*

Sunny shouldn't be here. Sunny was moving away. He was going to go and live a brand new life in the city. He was finally going to start leaving his house again, he was going to go to a new school and make new friends! *It was all over now, wasn't it?* Sunny had said he wanted to be friends again. In spite of all the horrible things Basil had done; in spite of all the horrible thoughts he stored inside his head. Sunny had finally freed Basil from the dark truth that he had been carrying alone for so long.

Sunny had been there with him in the hospital. Apologizing. *Smiling.*

*Basil had already stolen more from Sunny than any person should ever take from anyone in the world.*

So… **Why?**

Why does Sunny have to be locked in this cold, dark place with him?

*"Psst! S-Sunny!!"*

*"Sunny, WAKE UP!!"*

Basil whispered as loudly as he could, trying to keep his voice from cracking. He shook Sunny's shoulder and turned him over so that he could see his face. The other boy's eye was still closed.

**Oh god what if Sunny didn't wake up-**

*Sunny opened his eye halfway, his eyelid heavily drooping in an intoxicated fashion.*

"Basil?" Sunny asked.

*"Basil… I missed… I'm sorry…"* he mumbled. Sunny's eye closed again.

"Sunny!!" Basil whispered again, shaking him harder this time.

He had to wake up. He **had** to.

Basil didn't want to be alone in here.

Sunny's eyelid finally opened all the way, revealing his shadowy pupil once more. That little black dot silently peered at Basil from the darkness.

"Basil?" Sunny asked again.

"Hi Sunny. It's me…" Basil forced a tired smile.

*Sunny turned his head briefly from side to side, his face starting to look even more pale than before.*

"Basil, where are we?"

Basil's mouth felt dry. He didn't know how to respond to that. Hearing Sunny's question spoken out loud had finally solidified the situation they were in.

*Something was very, very wrong.*

Despite the violent sounds of the wind outside, this truck didn't appear to be moving at all. Wherever they were going, they either hadn't left yet or they had already arrived.

Basil quietly looked around. From his perspective, there was no way that this was the back of an ambulance. It didn't seem like any sort of vehicle designed for transporting people.

It was cold and dusty, and almost smelled like blood... *though perhaps that was just the bandages they were both wearing.*

There were no seatbelts or security straps of any kind, just two small mattresses laid end-to-end with piles of old blankets that they had been sleeping under. Whoever had put them in here was clearly not very concerned about their safety. They had been packed away like boxes.

*Maybe someone had abducted them?*

"The door wouldn't open…" Basil informed his friend. "D-Do you think we should we call for help?"

Sunny swallowed and slowly nodded his head.

Basil attempted to steel his nerves. Sunny was right. This was just some kind of mistake.

They had been at the hospital together, after all. Who would or could possibly abduct not one, but **two** kids who were under constant medical supervision? The both of them must have just been finally leaving the hospital.

*Basil wobbled back to the sliding door.*

"H-Hello?" Basil called outside. "Is t-there anyone out there? *We're awake now!* Hello?"

*No response. The wind howled.*

"Please, anyone?" Basil yelled. "It's very c-cold in here! C-Can someone please let us out?"

After a few more fragile attempts, it slowly became very apparent that nobody was coming.

Basil found himself shaking slightly, though from fear or from the cold he could not tell. Regardless, he swallowed his brief sense of panic and crept back over to where Sunny was still sitting up in his bed. The other boy was now very awake.

"Are y-you okay?" Sunny croaked. His voice was still coarse and unsteady. It was exceedingly obvious to Basil that, prior to his stay in the hospital, Sunny had not spoken much in a very long time. Basil had wondered how much more difficult it must have been for him to reveal the truth to their friends when he so often struggled to speak at all.

“Y-Yeah, I’m okay!” Basil said, himself unsure.

“Whoever was driving us here m-must have just stepped out for a minute… maybe we n-needed gas or something.” *Basil faked a laugh.*

“Oh. Right…” Sunny mumbled.

...

“Um… Basil, where are we going?” He quietly asked.

*Basil felt goosebumps on his arms.*

“We’re…” He started.

...

“I-I don’t really know, Sunny.” The blonde admitted.

“Maybe our injuries were worse than they thought?” Basil suggested. “Maybe they needed to rush us somewhere else just to be safe. How do you feel Sunny? H-How is your…” Basil trailed off.

“I’m fine...” Sunny whispered.

Sunny reached out and gently grabbed Basil by the arm. He pulled him down slightly until they were both sitting next to one another. Sunny threw one of the blankets over Basil’s lap. Basil quietly thanked him.

*“It’s really cold, huh?”* Sunny noted.

“Yeah, it is…” Basil agreed.

The two of them sat in silence together for a few minutes. They waited for a sound outside to indicate someone was there, or for the truck to start moving to wherever they were headed. Basil started to feel sick. Unsettling flashes of the last time the two of them had been alone in the dark flickered ceaselessly through his mind. This was all wrong. The nurses had made it very clear that they didn’t want him and Sunny occupying the same room unsupervised after

what had happened. Why would they leave them together like this? Sunny was probably terrified about being stuck alone with him again. Why d-

*Basil nearly jumped when Sunny suddenly scooted up against his arm.*

*"Sorry."* Sunny whispered. "It's just so cold in here…" The black haired boy peered out from the inside of his blanket as if he were wearing a hood.

*Basil calmed down a little. Sunny was still Sunny.*

If the two of them were together now, maybe that meant goodbyes could be delayed for a little while longer?

…

*Basil wished there was a bathroom in here.*

…

After a few more minutes had passed in silence, Basil finally spoke up:

"I think maybe I'll try to pull open the door again… I thought it was locked before but m-maybe it was just stuck because it's so c-cold." He said.

*Sunny nodded. They both stood up and made their way to the back of the truck, trying not to trip on the mess of blankets surrounding them in the darkness.*

*Basil stuck his fingers under the door grips and pulled up as hard as he could. To his surprise, the door squeaked slightly as if it might actually give in this time. Sunny joined him from the opposite side, pulling up with as much strength as he had to offer.*

*The door rattled loudly as it suddenly flew upward. It was finally open.*

*However, Basil's relief only lasted for a brief second before it swiftly turned sour.*

It was ***freezing***.

A gust of wind immediately tore through the inside of the vehicle, flying under Basil's shirt and pushing the loose blankets back to where Sunny had been sleeping.

Sunny quickly grabbed a blanket and wrapped it around himself before doing the same to Basil. Basil pulled the blanket around his shoulders and crouched, attempting to take a look under the now half-opened cargo door. It was nighttime, and they appeared to be in the middle of a huge, empty parking lot.

Basil's heartbeat stopped for a moment. Was it… *snowing?*

...

It appeared to be very dark outside. There was barely any more light outside of the truck than there had been within it.

After his immediate shock had subsided, Basil almost considered slamming the door back down. This wind could be dangerous. The unpleasant cold they had been previously experiencing was swiftly replaced by a deadly arctic chill. Even if they closed the door now, much of the heat they didn't know they had was already gone. Opening it all the way could be a really bad idea. What if they were stranded here?

...

Basil crept out the halfway-open sliding door and put his bare feet down on the freezing asphalt. He squinted in the dark, taking in his surroundings:

*It really was a huge parking lot.* The truck they had been inside of was unmarked. It just looked like a plain delivery vehicle.

The only light Basil could use to see was being emitted from a single streetlamp a few yards away from the front of the vehicle. It silently shed a dim yellow haze that made it easier to see the tiny snowflakes quickly blowing towards the ground.

Sunny also crept out of the back of the truck, following in his friend's footsteps. He struggled to keep the wind from removing the blanket hood he had been using to protect his eye bandages from the freezing air. Watching the other boy struggle like this made Basil feel sick.

Basil shuddered and crept slowly to the driver's side door, trying to see if there was anyone currently operating the vehicle. It was empty. Whoever had been in the driver's seat was long gone now.

There did not appear to be any signs of where they might have gone. Basil squinted and tried to peer beyond the snow. The entire parking lot looked to be surrounded by a dense forest looming off in the distance, as if the whole thing was somehow hiding away on a nature reserve.

Basil turned in the other direction. The parking lot ended before a rather large concrete building, at least three stories, that hung over them in silence. It almost looked like a hospital or a place of business. *Maybe this really was a mental institution after all?*

It had big glass windows, but there appeared to be very little light coming from inside. Only a faint blue glow emanated from somewhere on the first floor. Regardless, it seemed to be the only building present in their immediate surroundings.

**"SUNNY!"** Basil tried to call over the sound of the wind. "Over here!" Basil gestured towards the darkened building.

Sunny waved and started following shortly behind him. The two blanketed figures took quick steps across the icy lot. Basil felt like his feet were going to freeze off.

After stumbling through the massive parking lot for what felt like an eternity, Basil finally reached the concrete sidewalk. To his surprise, the automatic doors at the building's entrance actually worked, even though the overall darkness suggested the establishment would likely be closed. Basil turned back and waited to make sure Sunny was catching up.

It was dangerous to be outside, and Basil didn't exactly want to go into this building by himself. After a few seconds had passed, Sunny finally made it through the doors. He was breathing heavily and shuddered from the cold.

The two of them quietly stepped into the lobby. It wasn't exactly what Basil would call *cozy*, but it was still **much** warmer in here than it had been outside. *The smooth stone floor wasn't doing any favors for his feet, though.*

There was what appeared to be a hexagonal helping desk in the center of the room. Two unoccupied laptop screens cast small blue lights where two receptionists would likely have stood if anyone was around.

“H-Hello? Is anyone in here?” Basil called out into the large empty room.

*“My friend is injured, we need help…”* Basil trailed off.

The lobby split into two windowed hallways that crept along the sides of the building, as well as two large metal doors behind the reception desk that led deeper inside. To his left, Basil could see a bright light coming from a rectangular shape far down the hallway. Basil thought that it was probably a vending machine.

The hallway on the right seemed considerably darker, the only hint of light present creeping out the windows from the parking lot streetlamp still standing off in the distance. Flurried snowflakes softly blew against the windows before melting away on the concrete.

“L-let’s go this way, Sunny-“ Basil suggested, gesturing to the brighter hallway. Maybe there was a security guard working the night shift who could help them. Sunny nodded and moved by his side.

*They walked quickly.* Basil felt weird being wrapped in a blanket while wandering in a public space like this, but the white shirt and shorts they provided him at the hospital were not nearly good enough considering the situation they had just been in. Basil hoped whoever was in here wouldn’t mind that he came in without shoes. The two of them probably looked like zombies: a pair of half-dead bandaged teenagers cloaked in blankets creeping around the hallways at night. Sunny and Basil would probably scare someone shitless if they suddenly saw them like this.

The two of them finally approached the vending machine Basil had noticed previously. The light coming out of it was blindingly bright compared to the darkness of the rest of the building. The machine emitted a soft buzzing sound, barely noticeable over the howl of the wind outside. It advertised a variety of drinks on the front, including an all-too-familiar orange beverage.

*Too bad they didn’t have any change. Basil noticed Sunny smirk slightly.*

On the opposite side of the vending machine sat two restroom doors.

“Uh- Sunny… I know this is bad timing but I really need to, um...“ Basil gestured to the men’s bathroom.

Sunny nodded next to the vending machine. He’d wait.

“T-Thanks.” Basil said sheepishly. He pushed the door open with his shoulder and felt his hands along the walls, trying to find a light switch.

Luckily the switch wasn’t too far from the door. He flicked it on, and then back off again. *Nothing.* The bathroom was almost pitch black.

Basil nearly had a heart attack when he heard someone walk up behind him, but it was just Sunny again. Basil's friend awkwardly kicked at the doorstop with his bare foot until it fell into place, securing the bathroom door open. Now the light from the vending machine reached into the bathroom enough that the blonde could actually see where he was going.

*Basil was so stupid. Of course you could just do that.*

“T-Thanks.” He repeated.

"No problem." Sunny smiled and turned back to the hall.

There was absolutely no way in hell that Basil was going to use a urinal with Sunny standing right outside the open bathroom door. He slowly crept into the biggest stall that hid in the back of the room. Basil felt kind of ridiculous needing to go to the bathroom so badly under these circumstances, but he figured it would probably be even worse if he had kept his mouth shut about it. Basil hoped that Sunny was okay standing in that creepy hallway all by himself.

The trembling teen finished his business and then washed his hands alone in the darkness. Basil took a brief sip from the faucet. Drinking from a bathroom faucet felt really gross, but he couldn’t remember the last time he had drank anything. He felt rather thirsty.

As he took another brief sip, Basil quietly wondered to himself why the light refused to come on in the bathroom if the vending machine was running just fine. *Maybe the bulb blew out?*

...

*Basil leaned over from the sink just enough to check whether or not Sunny was looking in from the doorway.*

...

He wasn’t.

...

*Silently, Basil pulled up his shirt and checked on the cut in his stomach.*

He had been feeling a growing pain down there for a while. Basil wasn’t sure if it was because he opened the cut again from moving around so much, if the painkillers he had been given had worn off, or if he was just really hungry. *Who knew how long the two of them had been in the back of that truck?*

The bandages looked clean. Luckily, his cut hadn’t opened up again. The doctors had given him several large stitches to keep his body together but the wound still struggled to stay closed when Basil was moving. Regardless, it was a serious injury.

The boy prodded slightly at his aching wound. In truth, Basil couldn’t quite remember if Sunny had inflicted the cut on his stomach that night or if it was something Basil had done to himself after he thought Sunny had… *passed on.*

*Basil had a feeling he knew.*

Either way, he didn’t want Sunny seeing him looking at this. The two of them had bigger problems to worry about right now. Basil lowered his shirt and walked back out of the bathroom. Sunny stood still, quietly watching the snow blow against the glass, but he turned his head to face Basil as the other boy walked towards him.

“I’m g-good now, thanks for waiting.” Basil said.

The two of them continued walking down the hallway as it took a sharp right away from the windowed exterior of the building. With the light of the vending machine fading quickly behind them, it was becoming increasingly difficult to see. Squinting in the darkness, Sunny and Basil came across a door labelled “**Employee Access Only**” and pushed their way inside.

*The next hallway went on for quite some time.* Basil and Sunny stopped occasionally to poke their heads into each adjacent room, looking for any hint of human activity. There were a few personal offices, a conference room, an employee lounge…

*But not one actual person to be found anywhere.*

Basil kept trying the light switches in the various locations they visited, but to no avail. Each room was only sometimes kept lit by various empty laptop screens displaying darkened screensavers. Basil tried to call Polly's number on a landline phone but none of the keys seemed to work. No power maybe.

*Basil was about to suggest they go back and see if there was a phone in the lobby they could use when Sunny finally spoke up again.*

"I'm sorry, Basil." he croaked. "I just need a second-"

*Sunny was in bad shape.* His hair was a mess and his shoulders slumped awkwardly. Basil could tell that his friend's breathing was labored. Sunny let out a shaky exhale as he took a seat in an abandoned office chair.

---

Basil knew that out of the two of them, Sunny hadn't recovered much since their fight. While they were in the hospital, Sunny would always sneak into Basil's room during lunch and eat with him. The medical staff had tried several times to keep him out but Sunny had a way of showing up no matter what.

Sometimes, Sunny would tell Basil about the various plants and flowers that kind visitors from town had left in his room. He would awkwardly ask Basil questions about each of them, likely attempting to cheer the other boy up. Basil would be lying if he tried to claim that it hadn't had some positive effect on him.

But whenever Sunny wasn't around, Basil would stare at his vacant hospital room. Unlike Sunny, **he** didn't have anyone leaving flowers around. No mournful townsfolk came to check on Basil or express their condolences for the condition he was in.

*But Basil liked that. That was how it should be, after all.*

On one occasion, Sunny had tried to smuggle one of the plants he had been given from his room into Basil's, but his wobbly legs and lack of visual ability made it difficult enough for him to sneak into Basil's room by himself, let alone while carrying a potted plant. He ended up falling over in the hallway and making a huge mess.

Sunny got chewed out by the nurses for a good while once they had finished cleaned it all up. After that, the hospital staff removed the flowers from Sunny's room and placed them along the walkway in the hall.

*Basil felt rather angry at them for that, but Sunny just seemed to think the whole event was kind of funny.*

The blonde kept telling Sunny that he needed to stop walking back into his room so much. Sunny's head had hit the floor at the climax of their fight and he'd ended up with a significant concussion. Sunny had claimed that his head felt fine now, but Basil was simply not having it. Between his head injury and missing eye, Sunny **REALLY** shouldn't have been walking around at **ALL**, even if Basil's bed was only a few rooms away.

*Explaining this fact would sway Sunny on occasion, but he always ended up coming back anyway. It just took time.*

Disoriented by his friend's insistence, Basil underlined that if Sunny kept coming to his room that they were going to finally lock him out and the two of them wouldn't be able to see each other at all, but Sunny **still** refused to stop sneaking in. Over and over again Basil failed to get the point through Sunny's head.

Even so, Sunny always seemed miserable whenever Basil brought up the topic of them being separated... *so eventually Basil just stopped mentioning it entirely.*

*But as was inevitable, the doctors became so fed up with Sunny's continual disregard for his own safety that they did in fact lock him out of Basil's room.*

However, someone on the staff must have thought that Sunny and Basil's comical plight was kind of endearing, because shortly thereafter one of the nurses handed Basil a small walkie-

talkie she had said was *“from a friend”* and left the boy alone with it. They had given Sunny the other half of the matching pair, and now the two of them could communicate between rooms whenever they wanted. Basil was kind of annoyed that Sunny’s reckless self-endangerment had ultimately led to him being rewarded, but he couldn’t deny that he was happy he could now talk to his friend whenever he wanted.

For hours, the two of them would talk about books and comics and movies and plants. Technically Basil was the one doing the vast majority of the talking, but knowing Sunny was always on the other end listening made his chest feel fuzzy regardless. The two of them would wish each other sweet dreams before bed each night, and Sunny was always the first person Basil heard from each morning.

*It was the happiest that Basil had been for longer than he could remember.*

A few times, Basil overheard some of the staff outside his room discussing the 'eyepatch boy,' and how he had been having difficulty keeping his food down now that the two of them had been split apart. Basil gently confronted his friend about this, but Sunny simply brushed him off, saying that it was because he just didn’t have his appetite back yet. Basil didn’t want to make a big deal out of it at the time, but it had made him worried.

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Unfortunately, those old fears seemed much more reasonable now. The blonde stared at his friend as he took forced breaths while sitting in the office chair. It was no wonder Sunny couldn’t keep going under these circumstances.

*Basil silently cursed himself. He shouldn’t have asked so much of Sunny right now. He could’ve looked for help by himself.*

“Sunny?”

“Hm?” he replied.

“When was the last time you ate anything?”

Sunny’s eyebrow twitched. He smirked slightly.

“When was the last time **you** ate anything?” He said.

*That was true. The two of them had definitely been sleeping for a while. Neither of them knew for sure when they had last eaten. Basil scrunched his nose.*

“If I go and try to find you-“ Basil started.

*Sunny frowned.*

“-find **us** something to eat, will you be okay resting here by yourself?”

Sunny instantly grimaced and shook his head. “I can come with you, I j-just need a second-“

*Sunny tried to sit up straight but he could barely keep himself from wobbling. He looked almost as if he was going to pass out. Sunny noticed the way that Basil was staring at him and crossed his arms.*

…

“I’m going to go find you something to eat and drink.” Basil said firmly.

Sunny quietly groaned, but he nodded his head.

Basil walked through the office door and back into the hallway before turning around.

“And Sunny-“ Basil called back from the doorway.

Sunny looked up at him.

*“Don’t. Go. Anywhere.”*

Sunny smirked.

Basil really, **really** didn’t want to leave Sunny by himself in the dark, but he was even more afraid that his companion might fall unconscious. If Sunny really did pass out while the two of them were alone in this place then Basil might actually lose his mind.

Just thinking about it was putting him on edge. Basil’s speed walk accelerated into a light dash. Basil ran back past the vending machine and into the lobby. He moved over to the grey reception desk and climbed behind it.

There were several phones plugged in, but no matter how many times Basil tried to call someone none of the keypads responded to his input. Basil pressed the emergency 911 button hidden under the desk but the result wasn’t any different. His hands wouldn’t stop shaking.

Basil thought this place had likely suffered a power outage from the raging storm outside. The fact that the vending machine in the hallway was still on suggested that it was only a partial outage, but none of the lights Basil tried to flick on in the lobby or the hallway were responsive. The receptionist’s laptops remained on, but each of them had been locked.

After a few more failed phone attempts, Basil finally turned his efforts elsewhere. He dug his fingers around in the metal cabinets under the desk, rummaging through what must have been years worth of discarded office materials.

*Pens, paperclips, rubber bands, sticky notes…*

After a little more digging, Basil finally found some quarters that had long ago been left buried under the bureaucratic refuse. He picked them out and slid the spare change into his pocket. Basil wasn't one to steal but he silently hoped that the missing desk attendant would understand, given his current circumstances.

Basil returned to the vending machine and looked over the selection. In the end, Basil purchased Sunny a large bottled water and an Orange Joe.

Orange Joe hardly struck Basil as the healthiest beverage option available, but he was hoping that the caffeine might help Sunny stay conscious, at least until they could find help.

*In truth, that made it more for Basil than it was for him.*

While the machine slowly (and loudly) dispensed his drinks, Basil turned around and peered down into the darker hallway that he had taken note of before. He was hoping that there might have been a snack machine hiding somewhere down there in the shadows, but it wasn't looking likely. Sunny would have to make due with just drinks for now.

*And yet, something still felt off. Basil squinted while he stared into the other hallway, trying in vain to make out the blurry shapes in the distance.*

***S c r a p e***

*Basil's blood froze when he heard it.*

The blonde whipped his head back around. The vending machine had finally finished dispensing the drinks, unmasking a quiet scratching sound that Basil hadn't noticed before. The hairs on the back of his neck flared up instantaneously.

It almost sounded as if something was rolling across the ground. The sound was faint, but quickly growing louder. Basil stared into the distant darkness past the restroom doors. Something was moving around down there. It was inching closer.

**Basil was going to scream-**

…

*But it was just Sunny.*

Sunny was still sitting in the roller chair, slowly pulling himself back down the hallway with his feet. He noticed Basil looking at him and silently waved hello from the darkness.

*Basil couldn't help but smile to himself. He waved back. What an idiot.*

Sunny finally rolled up to him just outside the bathrooms.

"I thought I told you to stay put." Basil said.

"I'm still in the chair." His friend retorted.

Basil smirked and handed him his drinks. Sunny raised his brow slightly but didn't say anything. He twisted the mineral water open and took a large gulp. "Thank you Basil." he said.

"Y-yeah-" Basil stuttered out before composing himself. "I tried the phones in the lobby but none of them worked." Basil said. "I thought there might be a snack machine in here somewhere but I c-couldn't find one."

Sunny cracked open the can of Orange Joe and took a sip as Basil gazed out the window at the truck they had arrived on. It stood exactly where the two of them had left it, a single vehicle occupying a massive lot all on its own.

*Where had the driver gone? There was no way that they had just disappeared. It's not like the driver could have walked anywhere else in weather like this.*

***Didn't that mean that whoever they were, they had to have come into this building with them?***

*Sunny's voice suddenly snapped Basil out of his worried contemplation.*

"What about you?" He asked.

"Huh? What about what?" Basil was confused.

"Your drink."

"Oh! N-No thank you Sunny, I'm f-fine-"

*Sunny rolled his eye and handed the half-full can of Orange Joe to Basil. The blonde sheepishly took the can from his companion.*

Basil started to lift the can Sunny had drank from up to his mouth before he hesitated. His arms froze. Basil slowly turned around so Sunny couldn't see his face before he tentatively took a sip. He awkwardly handed the drink back to Sunny. Basil could feel his cheeks heating up.

"T-Thanks."

"I found you something in the office." Sunny said, digging his hand into his pocket. He pulled out two tiny LED flashlights, one blue and one green.

Sunny handed the green flashlight to Basil. He flicked it on and tried pointing the beam down the hallway.

"W-We'll have to remember to return these later." Basil whispered. *They really could come in handy, though.* Once the two of them moved away from the windows at the front of the building this place became almost pitch black.

Basil glanced at the large metal doors sitting in the back of the lobby and swallowed. Something about viewing a room through the beam of a tiny flashlight made everything in the empty building look even creepier than it did before. The lights cast strange shadows on the walls as him and Sunny walked towards the end of the lobby.

*Basil approached the metal doors and pushed.*

# Sunny Walks

*Sunny felt like his head was going to snap in half.*

Whatever medication the doctors had been giving him to dull the throbbing pain in his eye socket had long since faded away. He felt the full weight of that pain now, and it made him nauseous. He wasn't sure how much longer he could stay standing like this.

Sunny didn't want to scare Basil any more than he already was, but their situation was looking increasingly grim.

*Basil.*

Before him and his friend entered the building, Sunny had felt relatively sure that all of this must have been another dream. He hadn't been dreaming much since he was put in the hospital, but the situation they were currently in was so absurd and unsettling that Sunny felt as if it had to be a delusion of his own creation.

But even so, this place was not like anything that Sunny could remember from his colorful dreamscapes. Everything around him looked and felt disturbingly real, even more so than he had grown used to. *It wouldn't be all that strange if this **was** still a dream though, would it? His dreamscapes had always been exceedingly vivid.*

But seeing Basil illuminated beside the light of the vending machine in the hallway had convinced Sunny that this was reality. After all, Sunny could still see every cut and bruise on Basil's face, every place where his own nails had dug and his fists had landed.

*Nothing could be more real than that.*

The little black-haired assailant could feel his breathing growing erratic, but he managed to keep it under control. Sunny focused on trying not to trip as the two of them crept through the darkness.

Unfortunately, that was a considerable effort. Sunny had been told that his brain would eventually adjust to interpreting images with a single eye and that he would likely recover at least **some** of his depth perception over time, but that hopeful claim did him little good as of

now. Sunny was unsure how long *"over time"* would actually be, but he felt it was likely best to just not think about it for the time being.

Yet the more Sunny moved the more disoriented he became. The only thing that had kept him from falling flat on his face thus far was following closely behind Basil. As long as Sunny watched how the blonde walked he could more or less avoid bumping into the objects strewn about his immediate environment.

Lately, Sunny almost couldn't keep himself from staring at Basil. It had been a very long time since he had a friend to talk to that was actually made of flesh and blood. Well, except for Kel at least.

But **Kel** was often less a friend you talked **to** and more a friend you talked **at**.

Regardless, Sunny could not deny that something about Basil had been forcing his gaze recently. Sunny had been a bit… *insistent* about his time spent with Basil at the hospital, and although Basil always seemed to go along with Sunny's desire for a return to their typical interaction, the black haired teen had a feeling that he might actually have been tiring Basil out somewhat. Basil's grandmother had only just died, his friends now knew the horrible truth about what the two of them had hidden four years ago, and the one-eyed shut-in he had almost killed was now silently clamoring for his constant attention. Sunny's friend probably needed… *space.*

But so far, Sunny just couldn't do that for him. Even if Sunny wanted to keep his distance from Basil *(and he definitely did not),* the two of them were now stuck alone with each other once more. Sunny had no choice but to rely on Basil again as he could so often barely see the hand in front of his own face.

*Sorry, Basil. Sunny watched his friend's hair softly swing back and forth as they walked through the shadows.*

Sunny wanted to reassure his companion. He wanted to grab a firm hold of Basil and confidently assert to him that all of this going to be fine.

However, randomly grabbing Basil without warning in the middle of a blackened hallway did not strike Sunny as a particularly intelligent maneuver, so he tried his best to swallow the impulse back down. Sunny tried to put his mind to something else, but those attempts had been doing him little good thus far.

In truth, Sunny couldn't help but feel a little bit fuzzy inside despite their current situation. His mother had been staying in a hotel temporarily while he recovered from his injuries, but that did nothing to change the reality that their old home had already been sold a long time ago. Sunny was moving, and there appeared to be nothing he could do to change that simple fact. At best, he would only be able to stay with Basil until he had recovered from his injuries.

And those injuries had already improved considerably. Sunny had been due to exit the hospital any day now, and would therefore have no choice but to leave Basil behind again.

*Leave Basil behind, to stay in Faraway.*

Leave him alone with his old friends, who now knew everything. Alone with Kel and Hero. With **Aubrey**. Leave him to pick up the pieces of everything Sunny that had shattered.

*Sunny himself could barely stand to think of the worst possible outcomes. In his mind, Basil's future appeared painfully bleak.*

But right now, they were both alone together again... just the two of them. Alongside each other just a little longer. Sunny couldn't help but cling to that.

Even still, Sunny cursed himself for enjoying their predicament. This wasn't a game, Basil was terrified right now. They had no idea where they were and all Sunny could think about was how it meant he could continue fucking around, pretending as if him and Basil were somehow back to how they used to be. Sunny was horribly selfish.

...

After a few minutes spent in silence, Basil had offered to hold Sunny's hand if he was having difficulty keeping his balance. The other boy willingly agreed.

Sunny could feel Basil's hand shaking slightly. Slowly but surely, the two of them made their way to the back of the lobby. As they did so, Sunny couldn't help but take notice of the rather unusual way in which Basil had occasionally been walking.

Neither of them particularly seemed as though they wanted to discuss their injuries following 'the incident.' After Basil had broken down sobbing while he tried to apologize for what happened to Sunny's face, Sunny had made the executive decision that it was probably best if he didn't push the topic of their respective cuts and bruises.

None of that stuff mattered anyway. Sunny was just happy to have his best friend back. That being said, he still wondered what kinds of injuries he might have given Basil that would have warranted the flower boy also have to stay in the hospital for as long as he did. Sunny could tell from the way Basil sometimes picked at his shirt that there was an injury under there that was bothering him. Even still, Sunny hadn't asked about it yet. He didn't want Basil to get upset again.

But the boy wondered if it was okay to ask Basil about his *older* injuries. **The scars.** The lines on his wrists.

...

*Maybe not right now.*

Whatever they had done both to themselves and to each other, those concerns could be discussed later. Such problems were likely best left untouched for the time being, intentionally ignored until they were both a bit more… *functional.*

Sunny tried to focus on something productive.

He hadn't paid much mind to it before, but this place was actually pretty fancy. The walls were lined with elaborate modern art displays and there were small granite columns standing guard around the various hallways. Everything else was sleek and minimal, clashing against the harsh texture of windswept world outside. Sunny waved his flashlight around, desperately squinting at his surroundings in an attempt to make out each of the various shapes.

Sunny couldn't help but notice that while Basil's flashlight was quite effective considering its size, his own seemed rather dull by comparison. The light it emitted was barely half of what Basil's was managing. Sunny realized far too late that he had kept the one that had no battery. He smacked the flashlight on his palm. It brightened for a brief moment before quickly dimming again. *Ironically, Sunny's flashlight sucked.*

But that was okay. Sunny figured someone with half the vision could only make half the use of it anyway.

However, such a problem resulted in a tiny seed of worry forming in the corner of Sunny's mind. Who knew how old the batteries in these flashlights were; if both flashlights randomly went out, Sunny wasn't sure the two of them would be able to find their way back in this darkness.

---

Sunny braced himself behind Basil as he pushed through the large metal door in the lobby.

Another hallway. It was much wider than the previous, clearly intended to allow access to many people coming and going.

"H-Hello?" Basil called into the hallway. "Is anyone in here?"

The hallway did not respond. As such, Sunny and Basil promptly crept inside, the door swinging shut behind them. The one-eyed teen peered far away into the blackness, but

couldn't see anything in particular. That inescapable darkness created the illusion that this direction just went on forever. Whatever was at the end of the hallway was slightly too far away for their lights to reach.

The two of them silently walked forward for a bit before reaching the first hallway door on the left. Sunny twisted open the knob and peered inside, squinting into the shadows. It looked like some kind of dining room. *Weird.*

There was more modern art hanging on the walls and strings of disabled lights creeping around from the ceiling. Strangely, almost everything in the room had been labelled with some kind of price tag or monetary detailing. This stuff was being sold.

Sunny therefore assumed this was some kind of advertisement display room meant to show off how a room could potentially look if you purchased furniture or design services from whoever owned this business. Nothing of value to him or Basil, though.

The two of them exited the display room and continued down the shadowed hallway, poking their heads into each of the adjacent rooms as they marched forward. Each represented some potential interior design that had been labelled with price tags and production factoids. But regardless of their strange situation, Sunny couldn’t keep his eyebrows from raising. A lot of this stuff was insanely expensive.

There was another dining room, a billiards room, a living room-

*A piano room*. Sunny quickly shut the door and told Basil it was empty. They both kept walking.

There was an elevator halfway through the hall, but neither of them expressed much interest in stepping into an unknown elevator in this darkness. Basil pressed the button to check if it was even functional, but nothing ever happened.

Watching his friend stand before the elevator doors made Sunny grow increasingly nervous. He suddenly found himself recalling a memory that was very... **unpleasant**. He let out a breath he had been holding when Basil finally moved away the elevator.

The two of them were at last approaching the end of the huge hall before Sunny took notice of the final door on his right. A message stood out in bright blue letters:

*NOT FOR CLIENT ENTRY WITHOUT EMPLOYEE SUPERVISION. SCHEDULE A PERSONAL SHOWCASE AT THE FRONT DESK.*

Sunny wriggled his exposed eyebrow at Basil and pushed the door open. The two of them snuck inside, letting the door swing shut behind them. There was another door beyond it, a large sliding door made of frosted glass. Basil pulled it off to the side.

Sunny's mouth fell open. It was like a massive hotel room in here. There was a huge bed with black sheets and an enormous television mounted on the wall. The room had one tall window that let light in from outside which fell gently onto a coffee table. Sunny could just barely see the shadows of snowflakes as they peppered against the glass.

But in spite of how fancy it all appeared, there was strangely little comfort to be found in a room like this. All the furniture appeared unnaturally cold and modern, the whole space decorated in shades of dark blue and grey. The entire room represented a level of monetary excess that almost made Sunny feel ill. This particular space didn't have any price tags, but it likely did not need to. Sunny had to assume that whoever could afford a place like this was probably not very concerned about how much it cost.

*Sunny climbed onto the bed. He rolled over on his side and humorously patted the sheets, beckoning Basil to join him.*

"Take this seriously, S-Sunny…" Basil whined. The blonde's face grew a few shades darker in the shadows.

"Someone **has** to have left a cellphone somewhere in this building…" Basil grumbled, pointing his flashlight into a lamp cabinet. Sunny poked his head into a long bathroom that was adjacent to the bed, half-expecting a strange voice to claim it was already occupied. Basil pulled open a large wardrobe and sighed at its lack of contents.

It was a cool room, but nothing about it was particularly useful right now. After some time had passed, the two of them concluded that they should probably continue searching for help elsewhere. They returned to the long hallway and finally reached the end.

*Sunny and Basil stepped into a large rectangular room with a very wide staircase that descended to a lower level of the building.*

Looming beside the staircase was a massive sculpture of what vaguely resembled a man standing in the middle of a concrete pool. Sunny guessed that it was some kind of waterfall decoration, but the water wasn't flowing since the power was out. Sunny pointed his flashlight into the water and glanced at the statue's feet. Nobody had been making wishes.

Sunny turned his gaze towards a small grey door that hid behind the statue, firmly tucked away in the corner. Absentmindedly staring at it, he followed Basil around to the other side of the titanic sculpture.

Basil suddenly stopped, prompting Sunny to walk face-first into his back. The impact knocked Basil forward slightly.

“Sorry.”

“N-No problem.” Basil replied, giving him an awkward glance. Sunny scratched the back of his head.

...

***Focus***.

Basil had stopped to look at a large map running along the wall that seemed to display the layout of the building they were in. Sunny could make out a large rounded shape that he assumed was the lobby. He squinted at the various colored rooms and walkways. *Was this place really that big?*

While Basil became absorbed in the mess of directions, trying his best to decipher their location relative to the rest of the building, Sunny turned his attention to the remainder of the room. He crept around the sculpture and placed his hand on the grey door's handle before swiftly yanking it open, pointing his flashlight inside.

...

It was just a large supply closet. Brooms, vacuums, cleaning products, plastic shelves full of old furniture advertisements and towers of cardboard boxes littered a white tile floor. Sunny tried to get a look into one of the boxes but ended up awkwardly ramming the side of his head into the corner of a metal storage rack instead. *Ouch. Moving around without Basil was difficult.*

But before Sunny could regret choosing to poke around by himself, he took notice of a small red safety whistle someone had left tied around the end of the storage rack. He pulled it off and slipped it into his pocket. He felt that it might be useful. Sunny wasn’t sure if he was capable of screaming loud enough to get anyone’s attention, but with this he could definitely signal to someone from a distance. Maybe it could help a potential rescuer find them if they got lost in here?

Sunny silently cursed under his breath as he failed to judge the space between himself and an abandoned box of lightbulbs that he promptly stubbed his toe on. He ignored the pain and continued poking around in the rest of the supply closet, but no more of its contents seemed

particularly useful at the moment. He found an old yellow single-use camera but it didn't appear to have any film left. There was no way that Basil would want a piece of junk like th-

*Suddenly, someone let out a loud gasp directly behind him.*

*Sunny nearly jumped out of his skin as he whipped his head around towards the source of the sudden noise... but it was just Basil.*

Yet Sunny felt like his heart instantly dropped into his stomach when he took notice of the look on the other boy's face. Basil looked horrified.

*W-Why was Basil making that face at him?*

"**SUNNY! You're bleeding!**"

*Huh?*

*Sunny raised his hand towards his face just in time to catch a stray droplet of blood in his palm. His eye was bleeding again.*

*Sunny pointed his flashlight downwards. He could just barely make out his own reflection in the tile floor. His white facial bandages had darkened, the eye coverings having almost completely filled up with blood.*

*He might have hit his head a little harder than he thought.*

*Oops.*

# Red Carpet

Chapter Notes

Thanks for reading.

*"H-hold on Sunny- We can- I'll j-just-"* Basil stammered in a panic.

Sunny walked over and explained to Basil that his eye had bled on its own several times while they were in the hospital. "It always stops by itself eventually." Sunny told him. "It looks bad but it isn't that big a deal."

"It doesn't even hurt, to be honest." Sunny lied.

He wanted to say something else to reassure his friend but the more Sunny talked the more Basil looked like he was about to have a nervous breakdown.

"It'll finish dripping in a minute. I'll just have to find something clean to put under my bandages." Sunny concluded.

Basil didn't seem very convinced.

Basil demanded they return to one of the display rooms. The two of them quietly agreed that it would probably be best to sit down for a minute, neither wanted to go down that giant staircase at the moment anyway. The blonde grabbed Sunny's wrist and somewhat rigidly pulled him back towards the hallway they entered from. Basil's hand was shaking even worse now.

The two of them returned to the room with the massive television. Basil took a seat on the end of the black bed. His shoulders shook slightly as he watched yet another stray droplet fall from Sunny's face.

"I'm g-going to use the bathroom, Basil." Sunny whispered.

Basil looked at Sunny and nodded slowly, his left arm crossed against his chest.

Sunny stepped into the bathroom and pulled the door shut behind him. He gazed into his gaunt reflection in the bathroom mirror, his hair messily sticking up from his head.

The boy exhaled. Okay. He can do this.

Sunny placed his flashlight on the countertop, facing it upwards so it would illuminate the whole room to some extent. Sunny reached into his pocket and pulled out a small army knife that he had taken earlier from a utility drawer in the office room where he found the two

flashlights. The blade was very small, but it would remove the bandages well enough. Something serrated would have worked better, but he would have to make due with this for now.

Sunny had no bandages to replace the previous ones with, but he didn't have much of a choice in this situation. His old bandages were now soaked with blood, and they were growing progressively worse as the occasional droplet dripped out from the bottom of the cloth.

Sunny slowly and gingerly cut away at the thick bandages that concealed his eye. Every time he thought he had cut away the final layer there was yet another hiding beneath. The doctors had really mummified him.

Sunny thought he was adequately prepared to see his damaged reflection, but his stomach still turned when the last bandage finally fell to the ground. He looked a bit worse than he was expecting.

Almost the entire right half of Sunny's face was caked in dark red and black. Some blood must have leaked out a long while ago and had dried, having been left unnoticed under the thick bandaging. Even his eyebrow was coated in a thick layer of dried blood. Maybe it had bled while Sunny tossed around in his sleep. The doctors had warned him that a wound this severe would likely suffer from occasional... drainage. His face was a mess.

There was a tiny grey stitch in the end of Sunny's eyelid where Basil's shears had cut him as he forced them into his head. Sunny silently hoped to himself that it wouldn't hurt too much when those had to be removed. The eyelid itself had swollen up. That much swelling would have made it a bit difficult to see if Sunny still had an eye under there, but he didn't.

Where his eye used to be was now just the horrifying crimson void of a massive red clot. He could feel the clot moving around slightly whenever he blinked, but as long as he didn't look at his reflection too much he could mostly ignore the sensation. The clot was trying desperately to hold back blood from all the dozens of tiny arteries that had previously transported nutrients into his now-lost retina.

Sunny quietly wiped the misplaced scabs off the side of his face with a wet square of toilet paper while he watched the occasional dribble of blood trickle out of his vacant socket and slide down the sink. He was losing enough blood to take note of, but not enough that he was particularly worried he'd lose consciousness. It was kind of like having a nosebleed. But more gross.

The remnants of dried blood were clinging to his skin, and the bits that had gotten caught in his eyebrow hairs stung as he pulled them out. Sunny's fingers were growing increasingly red from his efforts. This was going to take forever.

*squeak*

Sunny turned rigid when he heard the bathroom doorknob start to turn. He forgot to lock the door. Didn't Basil know to knock first? Sunny quickly whipped his head back and forth, searching for a towel to hide his face with before Basil could see him like this.

“S-Sunny? Are y-you okay in here?” Basil nervously asked as the door swung open.

**Too late.**

Basil’s flashlight quickly moved its beam towards Sunny as he stood motionless in front of the bathroom mirror. Basil's entire body flinched, his eyes now wide.

Sunny felt like he needed to say something to reassure Basil that he was fine, or that it wasn’t as bad as it looked, but his tongue wouldn’t move. Sunny could barely breathe. They silently stared at one another, shocked.

Basil opened his mouth to speak but no words came out. His face had drained of all color. He was frozen in place. The blonde’s flashlight slid out of his hand and hit the floor but he didn't react, seemingly in a daze.

“Basil. It’s okay.” Sunny forced out.

Basil trembled and violently shook his head, tears building in his eyes.

*Sunny could only take a single step towards him before Basil dashed out the room.*

---

Basil was shouting at the top of his lungs.

His mind scrambled violently in every direction, incapable of holding a single thought.

“**HELP! SOMEONE HELP US! PLEASE!**” Basil yelled as loudly as he could.

He had ran out the bedroom door and sped down the hall into the darkness. The building seemed to sprawl out endlessly in a maze around him. He sprinted through the rooms they had visited, and into those they hadn’t. Everything started to blur together.

Basil slammed through closed doors, screamed into stairwells, dashed through hallways. There had to be someone in here who could help them. Anyone.

Basil screamed for Polly. He screamed for Kel or Hero or Aubrey.

He screamed for Mari.

Basil ran and sobbed and yelled and begged, his desperate cries for help disappearing into the dark, uncaring hallways of the empty building. Basil finally stopped with his hands on his legs, heaving. His lungs begged for rest. The whole room was spinning.

Incapable of standing, Basil fell onto the floor and clutched at the burning pain in his stomach, curling himself into a ball.

*“Please, someone… I’ll do anything…”* Basil deliriously begged into the floor.

He could almost feel SOMETHING emerging from the darkness and biting at him from all directions, opening up every cut and scrape and bruise, reaching inside him and pulling him apart. Basil felt a trickle of warm liquid rolling down his abdomen. His stomach was bleeding. He had very softly begun to paint the floor red.

The feeling of his warm blood and the sting of the cold ground startled him back to reality.

*What the hell was he doing?* Nobody was coming to help them here. Sunny was alone in the dark leaking blood from his face and Basil was here running down the halls and screaming at nothing. Basil stood up and turned around to go back where he came from. Sunny could fall unconscious.

Wait, where was he again? Which door did he come out of?

Basil didn’t have his flashlight anymore.

A faint sound started growing louder.

“…sil!”

“B…sil!”

The blonde could hear a small, panicked voice wheezing somewhere in the darkness. He tried to follow it, tripping over a loose carpet that hid underneath him. He bumped his shoulder into a doorway. Basil desperately tried to make out where he was going in the blackness but he didn’t have any light to see.

Basil felt a small trail of blood running down his legs. He dashed through a corridor and spotted the shape of Sunny trembling as he descended the statue staircase that Basil had mindlessly skid down before, a dim flashlight pointed at his feet.

Basil wasn’t sure that Sunny could see him yet. He shouted Sunny’s name from the side of the room, his voice breaking. The boy's head turned towards him in the dark.

“*Please be okay please be okay please be okay*-“ Basil muttered to himself as he ran towards Sunny.

Sunny looked down at him, blood still coating his face, his remaining eye filled with tears. Sunny was still standing, he just looked panicked. Sunny was okay.

“Basil!” Sunny gasped.

Basil felt the warm feeling continue to move down his legs. He couldn’t keep moving anymore. Basil fell to the ground in front of Sunny and desperately tugged at his feet.

“I-I’m so sorry- I thought for a second- I thought you were going to die-“

Basil cried out half-formed sentences as he attempted to breathe.

Sunny bent down and softly touched him on the arm.

“You h-had looked- looked- all that b-blood came out her head-“ Basil struggled to speak through his heavy sobs.

Sunny crouched down to where Basil had curled up and hugged him from behind. He rubbed his hand slowly down Basil’s spine.

“It’s okay, Basil... everything is going to be okay...” Sunny mumbled softly. Basil felt the small warmth of Sunny’s hands on his back.

Basil’s breathing slowly started to calm down but he couldn't keep himself from shaking. There was almost no sound except the two of them crying alone in the darkness.

---

Every time Sunny’s hand moved across Basil’s back he only seemed to tremble more violently. Sunny blinked as burning tears ran down his face. He felt like he was going to fall apart seeing Basil like this.

Blood from Sunny’s empty eye was now dripping onto the back of Basil’s shirt alongside his tears. Shit. He hoped Basil couldn’t tell the difference. The two of them sat there trying to compose themselves for longer than Sunny could keep track of. He struggled to think of something he could say to comfort his friend, but couldn’t make any words come out. Sunny noticed a small puddle of blood had started to build on the floor beside him and Basil.

Sunny assumed it was his, but he didn’t understand how he had dripped there from his current position. *Was all of that really from him?*

Sunny turned away from the red puddle. Basil had finally uncurled himself and had turned to look at Sunny, a panicked expression flaring across the blonde’s face.

Basil was saying something to Sunny but Sunny couldn’t hear him. *Wait, what was Basil saying?* Sunny’s head started to fill up with the fuzzy sound of static, his vision shrinking rapidly. Basil somehow felt like he was farther away now. As his thoughts became muddled, Sunny could vaguely make out the sensation of his friend grabbing at his arm.

Even at a time like this, Basil somehow looked really-

*Sunny’s head hit the floor.*

# Might've Been Me

Sunny didn't really dream, or at least nothing he could make sense of. Places and people flickered through his mind, but none of it came together into anything. The last sensation he experienced before waking up was a vague memory of Kel's smiling face after Sunny had opened his front door. Heheh. *Hey, Kel.*

Sunny's eye opened. He was lying on the black bed that was in the prop bedroom him and Basil had stayed previously.

Dim light was coming in from the window. The sun had risen into the sky, but it was still extremely dark outside. The snowstorm had gotten much worse than before and snow had started building heavily on the ground, piling up just outside of the windowsill. There were a few trees standing outside in the snow. Sunny squinted, but he could barely make out anything in the distance.

"Oh my god-" Sunny jumped as he heard Basil speak to him from the other side of the bed. Basil sat up quickly and grabbed something to give to Sunny.

"Sunny. **Drink.**" Basil demanded, shoving him a canned peach soda that he must have acquired from the vending machine. Sunny took a sip. It was really sweet.

Sunny suddenly couldn't stop drinking, barely stopping to take a breath. He hadn't realize how dehydrated he was. He finally took in air after finishing the can.

Basil wordlessly handed him another. Sunny kept drinking while Basil studied him intently. What was he staring at him like that for? Sunny lowered the can back down and raised a hand to his face. He felt his skin, it was smooth and clean. Basil must have wiped Sunny's blood off for him while he was asleep. Sunny felt his face heat up a little.

Sunny felt his face heat up a *lot*.

"H-How long was I out?" Sunny asked.

"A few hours." Basil replied.

Basil glanced at an artsy-looking clock on the wall. It didn't seem anyone had actually put batteries in it, since the room that they were staying in was just an elaborate room design showcase and not a real bedroom. Basil quietly guessed it was about eight in the morning. The sun was rising. People would probably be coming in to work today.

Neither him or Basil were certain what day it was. Basil thought it was Wednesday or Thursday morning, but admitted that he was basing that speculation on a vague gut feeling. Sunny couldn't really comment on that, time had already been hard enough to keep track of in the hospital after a head injury.

Someone would come in to a normal day at their job and find that a couple of teenagers had stolen their stuff, wrecked their expensive display room, and gotten splatters of dried blood everywhere. At least it would make for great conversational material with your co-workers over lunch break.

People would arrive and find them today. The two of them just needed to stay put and not make a bigger mess than they already had.

“H-how are you feeling, Sunny?” Basil asked.

“I feel like I slept really well.” Sunny actually did feel a bit better now. Basil shot him a look. *What?*

Sunny suddenly recalled what had happened last night. He swallowed.

“Did you c-carry me back here f-from the stairway?” Sunny asked.

“Yes.” Basil replied emotionlessly, his voice barely perceptible.

*Fuck.*

Sunny thanked him. Basil didn’t say anything.

Sunny noticed that it was a lot colder in the room than it had been before. The fact that the power was off must’ve meant that the cold air from outside was chilling this place. That worried Sunny a little.

“How’s your head?” Basil inquired.

Sunny touched the back of his head and felt a significant throbbing sensation pulsate against his brain. He had nearly forgotten that the doctors explicitly warned him against any more head injuries after his unconscious body smacked against the floor the night him and Basil fought.

“It kinda hurts but its not that bad.” Sunny reassured him.

Basil sat on the other side of the bed, facing Sunny. Sunny took note that Basil was wearing a new shirt. It was long sleeved and had a cartoonish picture of a spider on it. Basil had put on blue jeans that clung to his skin and wooly brown socks. The shirt was a little too big for him, wrinkling awkwardly as he sat, sleeves flopping down over his fingers.

Basil noticed him looking. “I found these in a storage locker in one of the offices.” He explained. “It feels a little gross to be wearing a random stranger’s clothes but it’s getting too c-cold in here…” Basil wrapped himself under a blanket again.

“I-I got y-you some new clothes too but I didn’t want to… you know…”

Undress him. Basil didn’t want to undress Sunny while he was asleep. Sunny felt grateful for that. His cheeks burned.

Sunny's white hospital garb was now flecked with dried blood. He considered asking Basil for new clothes immediately, this was gross.

Basil handed him a small bag of kettle corn. Sunny noticed that there was a fairly large pile of unopened snack food bags stacked on the floor behind Basil. He had found them something to eat.

Sunny tore open the bag and slowly started eating. He couldn't help but silently glance at Basil's face. Basil looked really… *pale.*

"What's the last thing you remember, Sunny?" Basil quietly asked.

"My head hitting the floor?" Sunny suggested.

Basil shook his head. "No, I mean before we got here. What's the last thing you can remember before we woke up in the truck?"

Sunny lowered his eyebrows. The last thing he remembered? He vaguely remembered bits and pieces of the last few conversations he had with Basil at the hospital, but nothing that would explain how they ended up here. "I feel like I'm forgetting something but I can't remember…" Basil said. "I thought maybe if I could recall what it was that it m-might explain h-how we got here."

"I don't think that whoever took us here was from the h-hospital… do you remember what it was like in the back of that truck?" He continued.

Basil's voice dropped to a whisper. "T-there's nowhere else to go around here S-sunny… whoever t-took us to this place must still be in here w-with us!" He quickly exclaimed, his eyes growing wider.

Sunny actually thought that Basil was wrong. If someone had put all this effort into kidnapping them, then there was no way they would have just left the truck unattended and somehow *not* have been able to track them down already. This was the only building either of them had seen last night and Sunny had practically redecorated the place in his blood. Besides, if they *had* been abducted, wouldn't they at least have been tied up?

Sunny expressed his objections to Basil. He watched Basil quickly shrink backwards when he used the term *"tied up."* Sunny immediately regretted what he said.

Basil still seemed quite agitated but he stopped breathing as heavily, having noticeably calmed down a little. "Y-Yeah I guess you're right…" he mumbled.

Basil lowered his voice. "*Do you t-think it might've b-been us?* Do you think we m-might've run away and s-stolen a truck so you wouldn't have to move from Faraway?"

Sunny shook his head. There's no way he would have dragged Basil into something like this. He had caused so much trouble for Basil already. Besides, why would the two of them have woken up in the back of the truck if they had been the ones to drive themselves here?

Sunny explained what he was thinking to Basil. Basil nodded and stared at his hands, lost in thought.

“Do you think it m-might’ve just been ME? Do you think I might’ve g-gone crazy again and *stolenatruckandkidnappedyou*-“ Basil rapidly continued, growing increasingly panicked.

Sunny quickly shook his head. Why and how would Basil abduct Sunny, put him in the back of a truck, drive out to some artsy interior design store in the middle of nowhere, and somehow *forget* that he had done all that. The whole idea was ridiculous. Basil calmed down again.

They both went silent for a while as the weight of their current situation continued to loom over them. Basil finally broke the silence.

“Do you w-want something else to eat, Sunny?”

Sunny’s stomach kind of hurt, but he did want to keep eating. Basil handed him a bag of salted almonds and some potato chips. The two of them quietly ate their office snacks together.

Basil spoke. “I got t-these from a snack machine I found down the other hallway.” He explained. “I d-didn’t want to go back down the stairs by myself but it seems like this place is kind of huge. T-there’s like a whole furniture mall down there or something…”

“I c-couldn’t find any cellphones and all of the cordless computers were locked. Sorry, Sunny.” The blonde looked downcast. Why was Basil apologizing? None of this was his fault.

The two of them had decided that it would be best for now if they rested in the room for the time being. Both of them seemed like they needed to calm down and get their energy back.

Basil had found a pamphlet in the lobby detailing this business’s home design services and specialties. He quietly flipped through the pages as him and Sunny ate.

Sunny slowly realized that him and Basil had probably been sleeping in the same bed last night. He felt his leg nervously twitch a few times. It’s not like that had never happened before, but the two of them were a lot older now. It felt a little… different.

Sunny considered how his other friends must have been feeling right now. *He had only just told them all the truth, and now Sunny and Basil had just vanished. What could he possibly say to them? That he admitted the truth and then him and Basil immediately got randomly abducted by a ghost truck that drove them out to a furniture design business in the mountains?*

There’s no way in hell that they would believe that. They’d never believe anything that Sunny said again. It was over. Sunny stared miserably at the empty can in his hands, drowning under the weight of his hopelessness.

Sunny considered asking Basil about their friends, but he knew the other boy was already thinking about it too. Sunny decided not to bring it up right now, as the two of them had more immediate problems to worry about. Nothing would be changed by obsessively worrying over something they couldn't do anything about. Sunny felt the cold air grabbing at his face. He sunk back into the bed let his mind quiet down.

Sunny listened to Basil quietly flip through the pages in his hands. Sunny would count the seconds until he finally heard the next page turn. He tried to imagine what Basil looked like right now, without actually looking at him. Sunny imagined the light furrowing of Basil's brow as he read, the blonde having become lost in focus. The teen listened to his friend gently exhale. *One breath... two breath... three...*

Sunny fell back asleep.

# The Bottom of the Pile

*Sunny had a bit of a problem.* He stared at the frosted shapes in the window and stretched his shoulder. A dull pain ached through his arm.

One of the doctors had warned him ahead of time that the large bandage on his shoulder needed to be replaced tomorrow. Sunny wasn't sure how long ago "tomorrow" had become at this point, but it had definitely been at least a day. Sunny had to take care of this before he forgot about it again. The nurses had repeatedly stressed to the two of them how important it was that their injuries didn't become infected, and Sunny really didn't want to listen to all that again. They had already re-wrapped his head a few times but most of the other cuts on his body weren't considered as urgent so the bandaging wasn't replaced as often. From what Sunny could remember, they hadn't removed his shoulder bandage a single time since he had arrived at the hospital.

One of the doctors had offered to remove it earlier if it was bothering Sunny but Sunny had declined. The tight bandage on his shoulder wasn't particularly uncomfortable, and Sunny had not yet adjusted to all these new people putting their hands all over him anyway. The less of it the better.

The problem was that he was alone with Basil. Having seen how Basil had reacted to his eye, Sunny was terrified that undoing another bandage was going to scare him. He thought about the way Basil had been shaking last night, and took a deep breath.

Sunny hadn't had anything to cover his missing eye with since he woke up, and Basil seemed to be doing fine with it, so maybe he wouldn't freak out this time? The cut on his shoulder was a much less serious injury after all. Sunny wondered how he was going to do this. Basil wouldn't even let him go to the bathroom without keeping tabs on him.

He kept saying he was worried Sunny was going to pass out in there. Sunny silently started removing the adhesive strips on the underside of the bandage, hoping Basil would stay focused on his advertising pamphlet. Sunny tried to stand up without making any noise.

But Basil was no longer reading. His gaze had become fixated on Sunny. He was staring right at him. Basil's eyebrows knit.

"Sunny-"

"You don't have to watch this, Basil. I was just supposed to remove this one, it's nothing to worry about." Sunny cut him off.

"I can help you."

Sunny tilted his head slightly.

"With your bandages." Basil said.

“Thank you, but I can handle this one myself. I just have to get this part to…” Sunny pried his finger under the adhesive strip and lifted upwards.

“I-It’ll be easier if I do it.” Basil claimed, standing up from the other side of the bed.

“Basil, it’s fine-“

“I need to, Sunny. **Please.**” Basil Begged.

Sunny frowned. He didn’t understand why Basil was being so Insistent.

Basil walked up and grabbed the boy’s hand, gingerly moving it away from Sunny’s body. Basil got closer, positioning his head over Sunny’s shoulder. He went to work prying the bandage off with small, gentle motions. His fingers kind of tickled.

Sunny could feel the slight caress of Basil’s breath on his neck as the blonde’s fingers danced across his shoulder. Sunny’s face turned slightly pink. This felt particularly… *intimate.*

Sunny could smell Basil again. That nice soft floral smell Basil always had. *How did he always smell so good?*

*Think about something else.*

How did Basil even still smell like that after all the time they spent at the hospital? All the flowers had been in Sunny’s room-

*THINK ABOUT SOMETHING ELSE.*

Was it just because of his name? Was that why Basil always smelled like plants and Hero always smelled like sandwiches? That’s probably not how it works. Sunny wondered if Basil could smell *him* right now. What did the Sun even smell like? Space probably didn’t have smells. Sunny probably just reeked of salty tears and blood. Was Basil done yet?

The bandage finally let go of Sunny’s skin as Basil tossed it aside. The cold air made Sunny’s cut sting slightly, but Basil’s warm breath on his skin felt nice. The two of them could now see a pointed set of large stitches poking out of the top of Sunny’s shoulder. No weird colors or excess swelling, it seemed to be healing just fine. Basil was holding back some kind of expression, but Sunny couldn’t tell what it was.

Sunny exhaled a quiet sigh of relief when Basil finally pulled away, having seemingly satisfied himself with the careful inspection of Sunny’s cut. Sunny reached over to the bed’s sidetable and picked up a half-drank soda can that Basil had given him earlier. He needed a drink after that. The blonde turned back around to face him.

Sunny thought his friend was done, but instead Basil promptly kneeled down in front of him to get a better look at the tiny scrapes and bruises on Sunny’s abdomen. He quickly and wordlessly lifted up the bottom of Sunny’s shirt. Sunny nearly spat out his drink.

*“B-b-buh-“* Sunny ineffectively attempted to ask Basil what the fuck he was doing.

Basil didn't even seem to notice. He continued emotionlessly eyeing over the skin on Sunny's stomach, inspecting his minor abrasions. There was a small bruise under his ribcage from where Basil's thumb had dug into his flesh when the blonde had tried to hold Sunny down on the night they fought. It was far from a notable injury, but Basil's eyes remained glued to it. Basil had been kneeling down there for a while now.

Sunny swallowed. The sight of Basil kneeled on the ground in front of him was making him feel really… different. Sunny could just barely feel Basil's breath moving across his stomach. He considered moving back a little but he didn't want to hurt his friend's feelings. Sunny was starting to feel lightheaded. He couldn't take much more of this.

Basil finally let Sunny's shirt down.

Basil quietly muttered something Sunny couldn't make out, but he thought it sounded like an apology. Sunny started to sit back down on the bed again until he felt his friend's finger lightly tap him on the back.

"You should take off those clothes, Sunny." Basil instructed him.

*Sunny felt like his head and the floor were about to go for round three.*

His friend handed him a pair of jeans and a grey long sleeve shirt with a stripe across the middle.

"Thank. You Basil." Sunny replied awkwardly. Basil glanced quizzically at him.

"I-I'm sorry Sunny, but I don't have any more socks…" The blonde dejectedly stated. Sunny shook his head.

The black-haired teen quickly swapped out his old hospital rags for the new clothing after ducking into the bathroom. A little large, but it fit him fairly well. It was still cold, so Sunny stepped back onto the bed and wrapped himself up with the covers. He needed a moment to recover from that de-bandaging experience. Basil stood at the foot of the bed and turned to face Sunny.

"We need something to cover your eye with. I saw a medical station near the office rec-room where I took this food..." Basil explained.

"I'll only be g-gone a few minutes. Stay here, okay?" He asked.

Sunny frowned. There was no way he was letting Basil go off by himself again after what had happened last night.

"Don't worry Basil, I feel a lot better actually." Sunny said. "I think now I'm f-"

"No you aren't." Basil cut him off.

"I'M. FINE." Sunny insisted a little more forcefully than he intended to.

“Sunny.” Basil spoke sharply. “Please don’t make this any harder than it needs to be.” he continued.

“You are in no condition to be helping anyone do anything. You’ve already lost who knows how much blood and you can barely walk or see. I am not arguing over this with you. You are staying here.”

Sunny tried to push the point further but he looked Basil in the eyes and bit his tongue. He could still see the tear stains on Basil’s cheeks. Basil looked exhausted.

Sunny pointed his head down at his arms and nodded miserably. Basil took a step towards him.

Basil kept moving closer until the two of them were looking each other directly in the face. He reached out gingerly and took Sunny’s wrist in his palm.

“PLEASE, Sunny. I need to hear you promise you’ll stay here for me.”

“I p-promise.” Sunny mumbled under his breath. He could feel his face start to flush red.

Basil let out a small smile. The two of them sat together in silence for a moment. The wind outside was still loud, and when neither of them were walking or speaking the soft howling emerged more clearly through the walls.

“Sunny, I need you to lock the door after I leave, just in case. I’ll knock twice when I get back.”

Sunny’s mouth tasted like metal. He felt himself starting to panic. Basil reassuringly squeezed his hand. “It’ll only be for a few minutes.” Basil added.

Sunny thought if he kept quiet Basil might stick around a little longer. It looked like maybe it was working, because Basil hadn’t moved an inch. Basil just sat there, absentmindedly rubbing back and forth across the top of Sunny’s hand with his thumb. He was staring down at the ground, his eyes glazed over.

“Um, Basil-“ Sunny finally spoke up. Was Basil still leaving?

Basil snapped out of it. He slid his hand off of Sunny and stood back up. “Alright I’m going. I’ll be b-back s-soon okay?” He crept towards the doorway.

“Good luck Basil!” Sunny called weakly. Basil quietly waved at him and crept out the door.

*Silence.*

Sunny sat alone in the bed by himself. The wind beat itself viciously against the side of the building. The black-haired teen stared up at the ceiling. He felt the throbbing pain from his missing eye pulsate occasionally in the back of his head. A few minutes past. Then a few more.

Sunny got out of the bed. He needed to distract himself with something before he went insane.

After locking the door as he had been instructed, Sunny started organizing the trash in the room. He put the used soda cans and water bottles in a little pile. Things had started to look a little more composed now. Sunny noted how strange it felt to see cheap office snack foods piled up in such an expensive-looking bedroom. He silently hoped that neither of them would get in too much trouble for being in here.

Sunny poked through the selection of unopened beverages, seeing if there were any more Orange Joes left. Sunny didn't really enjoy the horrid taste of Orange Joe very much but it made him nostalgic. Unfortunately there was not an orange can anywhere in sight. Sunny sighed. He must've drank the only one last night.

Basil still wasn't back yet. Sunny considered walking out the door and trying to find him, but he had no idea where Basil would even be. Sunny imagined Basil's disappointed face after finding Sunny limping through the hallways looking for him.

Sunny would wait a few more minutes. *Maybe Basil had found someone walking into the lobby?*

Sunny crept into the bathroom again. Basil had piled up the bloody towels he must have used to clean Sunny's face in the corner by the shower. Sunny felt a chill run down his spine as he realized how many there were.

...

*Were all of these towels really from him?* Sunny picked through them.

Basil's old shirt had been carefully hidden under the bottom of the pile. The lower half of the shirt was entirely red.

...

*No.*

This was wrong. All of this was wrong. ***Why the fuck did he let Basil leave by himself?***

*Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck-*

Sunny couldn't keep himself from shaking. He quickly turned around and tried to run out the bathroom, but he could barely keep his balance. Everything around him was spinning. Sunny's head had smacked the floor twice, once from when he lost consciousness in Basil's room and again at the bottom of that stairway. He had definitely given himself a concussion. Phantom lights flickered in front of Sunny's eye.

Sunny blinked, and the next thing he knew he was face-first on the floor. He tried in vain to stand himself back up, but his arms felt weak. Sunny felt something red begin to flow down his face from his forehead.

*FUCK FUCK FUCK-*

His vision grew dark.

# Little Basil's Little Hell

*Basil walked quickly down the hall.*

Sick to his stomach, the flower boy felt his guts ache with a burning pain.

Once he regained the ability to eat, the doctors had kept him on a diet of soft, plain foods: applesauce, oatmeal, pudding…

One of the nurses had gently warned Basil that the first time he ate solid food again it might hurt. They were right. It did. *A lot.*

The vending-machine nuts Basil had eaten felt like they were burning a hole in his intestines. He should have just eaten fruit snacks instead. In his panicked attempts to finish the job, Basil must've only grazed part of his intestines rather than make a full cut, which was probably the only reason he was here considering the depth of his wounds at all.

Basil bit his tongue. Things were looking extremely bad right now.

Basil had more or less lost himself last night. Everything after Sunny fell on the ground was a blur. For a while, Basil had kept shouting Sunny's name at his unconscious body, hoping in vain that the black-haired boy would simply regain consciousness after a few seconds. He did not.

Basil vaguely remembered as though someone had once instructed him that you shouldn't move someone who was unconscious, but Basil felt himself overwhelmed with panic at the idea of just letting Sunny lie on the floor, simply HOPING he would wake up again.

*Basil couldn't leave him lying at the bottom of the stairs. Not there. Anywhere but there.*

This had to be some kind of horrible nightmare. How was this happening all over again? *Why?*

Basil wasn't sure how he managed to drag Sunny all the way back up to the display room, but he figured it must have been the adrenaline. The hallway was a gaping black void. Basil could feel how the entire building rotated and squirmed, wrestling against his legs as he attempted to carry Sunny back to the bedroom. Hints of their blood dripped onto Basil's feet.

He finally made his way back behind the door, and gently placed Sunny onto the dark bed. Basil folded the blanket over his friend and stuck a small pillow under his head. Basil stood back and watched him for a moment. Still breathing.

The blonde teen fell to the floor. Basil had lost a decent amount of blood, enough that he really needed to lie down and take a breather.

*No.* He didn't have time for that.

His mind wouldn’t allow him to rest right now, not while Sunny was like this. There had to be something he could do.

Basil checked his stomach wound again, inspecting the lines of dried blood that now led down to his legs. He knew that he had lost more than a few trickles of from the edges of his stitching, but it didn't appear to be quite as bad as he was thinking. Basil figured if he had actually ruptured his internal organs that the bleeding would be a bit more *extreme*. The constant stinging pain was distracting, but Basil had already felt far, far worse.

For now, Basil was okay. He just needed to make sure that from now on he walked slowly and carefully as not to put further strain on his injury. He could do this.

Basil hobbled back into the lobby and returned to the empty offices, procuring himself slightly thicker clothing that he hoped would fit the two of them. He whispered a quiet apology to whoever's garments he had just looted. He stole more scattered change and forgotten bills from the various office desks and returned to the vending machine in the hall. He bought as much as he could carry, and made his way back to the display room wherein his friend remained unconscious.

Basil checked on Sunny again. Still breathing. Please wake up. Please.

Incapable of relaxing at all while Sunny was out cold, Basil crept back out the door and down into the lobby once more. He wandered through the darkened hallway the two of them had taken note of earlier. Basil quickly tore open the hallway doors as he moved past them. More offices.

Basil eventually opened a door and wandered into an employee rec-room. Colorful lounge chairs were scattered about the empty space, some gathered around what Basil assumed was a pool table. Still no people.

Basil noticed a small open kitchen at the end of the room, with a fridge, stove, and microwave tucked behind a granite countertop. Basil crept over to the fridge and tore the door open, shining his flashlight inside.

Just a loaf of white bread that had been left in there for who knows how long. Basil took it anyway. It was only as cold as the room itself. He turned his head back to the other end of the recreational zone.

Tucked away in the corner were a couple of employee restrooms and two vending machines. One was another machine serving drinks, the other a snack machine this time. Basil pointed his flashlight into the snack machine, eyeing over its salty contents. Unlike the previous vending machine, these two showed no signs of power. No lights, No sounds, the two metal monoliths simply stood silently in the lifeless blackness.

Basil looked over the rest of the room angrily. Not good enough. Sunny wasn’t going to get better on vending machine soda and stale bread.

The blonde hobbled over to the billiard’s table and picked up the cue ball. Basil channeled his inner Kel and viciously chucked it towards the machines, growling in frustration.

The ball easily smashed through the glass of the snack machine, sending bits of silicon flying around the room. It was extremely loud. Basil half expected some kind of burglary alarm to go off, alerting a group of previously-unseen interior design employees to materialize from the darkness and chastise Basil for his desperate food crimes. Maybe an announcer would step out from behind a hidden door and announce that all of this was some kind of cruel fucking joke.

But nothing happened. The room went silent once more, before a large chunk of glass dropped down from the side of the now-punctured snack machine, sliding off to crack on the rec-room floor. The remaining drink machine stood to the side, silently mourning the loss of its brother and fearing its life might be next.

Basil returned to where the lounge chairs had congregated and pulled a small yellow carpet up off the floor. He threw it in front of the snack machine, hoping the hard fabric square would help him avoid getting poked by bits of sharp glass through his newly-stolen socks.

Basil carefully stepped onto the carpet and reached his arm into the now-massive gap left in the side of the food dispenser. He greedily grabbed bags of chips, popcorn, nuts, etc. and shoved them into his pockets before starting to simply pull them out and throw them back towards the hall doorway. Basil gutted the majority of the machine's contents before finally stepping away.

The boy walked back across the carpet and towards the scattered pile of office treats he had flung at the door. He felt a sharp pain in the bottom of his foot.

Basil pulled off his sock and used his flashlight to see so he could pull a small bit of glass that had lodged itself in his sole. His skin started to bleed out a tiny droplet. Basil rolled his eyes.

The blonde teen began to hurriedly shove the foodstuff he had thrown against the door into his pockets again, before stacking as much as he could carry into his shirt. Basil was about to escape back into the lobby with his pirated goods before suddenly glancing at something hanging on the wall that caught his eye.

Basil noted a white box with a green square in the middle which was in turn decorated by a simple white cross. It was a first-aid kit, or minor injury medical station.

Basil looked down at the massive pile of snack foods he was now carrying in his shirt. He'd come back. Basil lugged his bounty back down the furniture display hallway and pushed open the bedroom door. He quickly dumped the contents of his shirt and ran over to check on Sunny.

Sunny *still* wasn't awake yet. What if Sunny had stopped breathing while Basil was out of the room? Basil panicked. He was endangering Sunny by leaving so much. Basil took a seat on the opposite side of the huge bed and looked over the one-eyed person he had shared so much pain with.

*Basil intently watched every rise and fall of his friend's chest with baited breath, as though the next might never come.*

Basil snapped himself out of his head. Sunny *had* finally awoken, and he was in bad need of something to cover his stitches. The sad little gardener crept down the hall back to the now too-familiar reception desk.

Basil considered going back down the statue staircase in search of a cellphone, but thinking about what had happened last time made his hands shake. He decided to stay on the first floor for now.

The teen looked out the window at the truck that had become more easily visible as the sun had risen. The vehicle stood unchanging in the middle of the increasingly frozen environment, remaining the parking lot's sole occupant. Snow had started to build around the wheels.

Basil averted his gaze from the window and back down the previously-shadowed hall just in time to see something small and furry escape around the corner. *A cat?*

Basil stepped forward slowly before poking his head around the rec-room doorway. Not a cat. A raccoon.

The small furry creature had been looting the discarded vending machine snacks that Basil had left by the door after finding he couldn't fit them all in his shirt last night. Now munching away, it did not appear as if the animal had yet noticed that it was currently being viewed by an herb. With his blue eyes wide, Basil watched the small beast deftly pick apart foil bags with its fingers. He had never been this close to a raccoon before. It was pretty cute.

Wait, this was bad. Once it had consumed the floor snacks, the raccoon might try to grab the few remaining foods still confined inside the vending machine and end up stepping into the sea of broken glass. Basil needed to get the creature out of here before it hurt itself.

Basil tip-toed into the room quietly before taking position behind the raccoon, readying himself to scare it back out the rec-room door. Basil braced for the sudden chaos. Amazingly however, the animal was still yet to notice the teen's presence, having completely involved itself in its stolen feast.

This made Basil feel bad. What was he supposed to do now? Yell at it? Stomp his feet? It's nothing personal Mr. Raccoon, it just isn't safe for you to be in here right now.

Wait, what if the raccoon had rabies? What if it turned around and instead of escaping out the door it tried to chase Basil instea-

The raccoon finally caught on to the shadow of the boy standing over him. It launched itself into the air with its feet before making a mad dash *behind* Basil and deeper into the empty room. Great.

After briefly playing a bit of interspecies tag, Basil finally managed to block the raccoon's path deftly enough that it decided to run back out the entrance. Basil stepped back into the hall to see where the tiny beast was headed.

Basil considered chasing the poor animal outside, but it was so cold out there. The blonde decided that it was fine if the two of them shared this empty building with a raccoon. It wasn't his pest to get rid of anyway, Basil had bigger problems to worry about.

Actually, how had the raccoon even gotten in here in the first place? Would an automatic sliding door open for a raccoon?

*Actually*, how had the sliding door opened for him and Sunny when they came in last night? Hadn't the power gone out in this place?

Basil considered it for a minute. Automatic doors were likely equipped with backup battery power for blackout scenarios, but it was still strange that the door was unlocked if nobody was currently inside the building. He glanced down the other hallway at the first soda machine. Lights were on. It's still running. Basil didn't think it seemed particularly necessary to invest in any sort of emergency power set up for a vending machine.

He glanced back into the lobby. The blonde considered writing down some kind of SOS on a piece of paper and leaving it by the door to request a potential entrant help the two teens return to the hospital, but now was not the time. Sunny needed him. Anyone entering the building would likely make themselves known regardless.

Basil returned to the employee rec-room. He walked over to the large white medical box hanging on the wall and tried to lift the entire thing off. It was even heavier than it looked. Basil set it down on the floor outside the room and pulled the door shut as to prevent future raccoon mishaps.

With great effort, he managed to lug the whole kit back out of the hallway. Basil made it about halfway past the lobby before he buckled over from the sharp pain in his abdomen. He tried to set the box down gently, but ended up slipping and spilling the contents of the kit all over the floor. The flower boy scrambled to pick up the scattered mess of bandages, ointments and medications.

In a rush, Basil ended up accidentally pricking his hand on a stitching needle that had gotten caught in the gauze. A tiny red bead started to build on the side of his finger.

Basil hissed in frustration. He was getting sick of this.

After a couple minutes of irritating product rearrangement, Basil ended up able to get the kit to close shut again. The blonde dragged the container up to the display room door and knocked twice.

"Sunny, I'm back!" Basil exclaimed in relief, setting the medical kit down beside the sliding door. "You won't believe what I found running around in the hallway." He smirked.

"Sunny? Are you there?"

*No response.*

Basil knocked again. Silence.

“Hey, can you unlock the door for me please? You didn’t just fall back asleep did you?”

The room remained silent.

Basil started knocking a lot. Then he started pounding on the door with his fists. Then he started screaming his friend’s name into the doorframe. Sunny did not open the door.

Basil could feel his mind snapping in half. Everything in the hallway seemed to tilt sideways. Basil tried to breathe, but there was no oxygen.

A key. There had to be a key. The display room had been left unlocked when they found it but the keyhole in the metal door handle meant there had to be a key to interact with it from the outside.

Basil sprinted back into the lobby and sped down the vending machine hallway back to the first set of offices. He started tearing rooms apart: pulling out file cabinets, ripping open desks, smashing open lockers. Blood once again started to dribble out of the sides of Basil’s stomach. Basil didn’t notice.

He returned to the locked door with a fistful of random keys he had stolen. Hands shaking violently, Basil jammed each key one by one into the locked door, each attempt resulting in another miserable failure. Suddenly, Basil wasn’t sure of where he was, or *who* he was, or what he was actually doing. His mind was overwhelmingly flooded with an inescapable feeling of horror. All he knew is that this door had to open.

Basil tried to use the final key. It did not fit.

**Basil suddenly recalled where he was. He must be in hell.**

That's why nothing about this made sense, why they woke up in the back of an unmarked truck, why nobody had come to save them.

This was hell. Basil and Sunny had died in the hospital and this was Basil’s eternal punishment. He would watch his best friend die over and over, and each time it would be his own fault. The universe gave him what he wanted more than anything just so it could crush it to pieces in front of him.

Basil felt like he might’ve started screaming, but he couldn’t really hear his own voice. The air around him seemed impossibly thick, as if it was quietly crushing his head.

Suddenly, the door squeaked open. Sunny stood there, looking out at him. A small river of blood was dripping down his face from his forehead.

*“Bassil.”* he mumbled awkwardly, before starting to collapse forward. Basil managed to catch him on his shoulder and prevent Sunny’s skull from pounding into the doorframe.

“SUNNY!” Basil yelled in his ear. Sunny’s eye swerved randomly, his expression dazed. The black haired teen exhaled loudly before passing out again.

Basil set Sunny down in the walkway and started applying pressure to the weeping cut on his forehead. Sunny must have hurt himself. This was his fault. Basil cried and mumbled and begged for his friend to wake up again.

After what felt like an eternity, the cut on Sunny's head had finally stopped bleeding. Sunny's breathing was still steady, but his forehead had begun to turn an ugly purple hue. Basil sliced off Sunny's old head wrapping with the medical scissors and placed a square bandage on Sunny's forehead. Forehead injuries were dangerous, Sunny might need stitches again.

The blonde left his friend lying on the floor and ran past him back into the mock bedroom. Basil whipped his head from side to side, looking for anything that could help him fix what was happening right now. Basil turned back around to look at Sunny's position in the walkway. To his absolute horror, Sunny had somehow stood back up again and was awkwardly hobbling towards him with his hands on the walls.

*"B-bisl…"* his friend mouthed incoherently, like a zombie.

"S-SUNNY STOP MOVING!" Basil cried, grabbing his friend's hand and carefully leading him into the room. Sunny laid back down on the bed, and shakily tried to pull the covers back over himself. Basil helped him, folding the blanket over from the side.

*"Itsh so cold…"* Sunny slurred, before promptly closing his eyelids again. Basil held his friend's hand and wept.

"Everything's going to be okay, Sunny… it's going to be okay…"

---

*Sunny wasn't sure where he was.*

*He just knew he was having a lot of trouble keeping his eyelids open.*

*Sometimes he opened his eye and saw his friend Basil looking down at him. Hi, Basil!*

*Sunny wondered where all his other friends were. Did Aubrey and Kel come too? Was Hero with his sister?*

*Sunny opened his eye again. Why was Basil crying? Did something bad happen?*

*Don't cry…*

*Basil's mouth was moving but Sunny couldn't figure out what he was saying.*

*Sunny wished Mari was here. Mari always knew what to say to make Basil feel better.*

*Sunny couldn't speak, so he lifted his hand towards Basil's face. Basil caught it and held it against his cheek. Basil was warm.*

*Don't cry, Basil. It's okay.*

. . .

*I'm so sorry, Basil.*

Sunny passed out again.

# I Don't Understand

Chapter Notes

> I hereby solemnly swear that this story doesn't end up with them realizing it was a dream, or meeting Satan, or waking up in a back-alley after a methamphetamine-fueled drug coma. Thanks for leaving some comments, have a nice day, and happy new year.

The next time Sunny awoke, he knew where he was.

Sunny was still in the advertisement bedroom, staring at the giant television set, which remained pitch black. The sun had started to set again, and the room had begun to fade back into darkness.

Sunny tried to move his head and immediately felt a stabbing pain in his skull that made him feel like he was going to blow into pieces. He quickly laid back down into the pillow. *Holy shit.*

Sunny suddenly realized that Basil was once again residing beside him.

Basil was sitting upright, twisting the top off of some kind of medicine bottle with a spoon in his hand. He carefully poured a dose onto the spoon and started slowly moving it towards Sunny's face.

"H-Here comes the Airplane, Sunny~" Basil sang.

Sunny's jaw dropped. *Was he being serious?*

Basil mistook Sunny's jaw opening for an invitation as he promptly moved the spoon into Sunny's mouth. Sunny reflexively bit down, nearly choking on the spoon in protest. Basil smiled happily. Sunny swallowed the disgusting spoonful of medicinal fluid. Basil was about to pour another out for round two but Sunny grabbed his wrist. "My mouth is not an airport." Sunny stated in his defense. Basil looked kind of disappointed, but he relinquished control of the spoon to Sunny.

Sunny made a face. Whatever Basil had just given him had tasted really awful.

If by second nature, Basil immediately lifted a bottle of water to Sunny's mouth. Sunny tried not to choke as he greedily drank the liquid. It wasn't particularly easy to move his head, but Sunny was extremely thirsty. He finally pulled away from the water and coughed. Basil lifted the edge of the blanket and wiped a stray droplet off his chin. "Thanks." Sunny ashamedly mumbled.

Sunny felt Basil's hand slowly running up and down his right arm. He could barely remember the last time Basil had been so touchy with him. It was... nice.

*Sunny kind of wanted to touch him back.*

"Here Sunny, I have something to put over your eye..." Basil said, peeling a plastic strip off of a large adhesive medical patch and showing it off to his friend. "I don't think an eyepatch is what this is supposed to be used for but it's better than risking you getting an infection." The blonde held the bandage up to Sunny's face. "Do you mind if I..." he trailed off.

Sunny nodded, a growing warmth buzzing around in his cheeks. He closed his bloody eyelid as Basil softly placed the bandage over his exposed socket and gently pressed it into place with his fingers. The lost eye being protected once more from the cold air around them gave Sunny a hint of relief from his constant pain. Basil seemingly tried to smile, but he only managed to make his mouth twitch as the brief expression of positivity quickly fell in line behind his concerned demeanor.

*"Are you still thirsty?"* His friend inquired.

Sunny nodded. Basil lifted the water back to his face and let him drink again.

The two of them continued like this for a while, as Sunny's mental faculties slowly spun back into motion.

"How long was I out?" He asked. Basil shrugged.

"Has anyone come to find us yet?"

Basil frowned and shook his head, blonde locks somberly swaying across his face.

"Basil, are you okay?"

Basil raised his eyebrows slightly before letting out a soft smile. "Yeah. Now I am." He whispered.

Sunny nodded. That was good. For some reason, Sunny felt even more worried about Basil then he had been before. Why was he so worried? Was he forgetting something?

Basil handed him a bag of salted chips and a bag of fruit snacks. The two of them quietly chewed together in silence, listening to the storm continue to roll around outside. Sunny took note of what appeared to be an open box of medical supplies sitting on the floor in the corner of the room.

For some reason, Sunny couldn't stop staring at the spider on Basil's sweatshirt. Wasn't Basil wearing something else when they came in? *Had Basil changed shirts?* Whose shirt was that?

Something about that spider just didn't seem right. Even by spider standards.

Sunny suddenly remembered what he had seen in the bathroom as his eyelids grew wide. The black-haired teen took a deep breath, and listened to his friend eating beside him. After briefly mustering his courage, Sunny spoke.

*"...Basil, do you have an injury on your stomach?"*

Basil froze, no longer chewing. He swallowed slowly.

"Hm? O-Oh, yeah…" Basil trailed off, awkwardly scratching the back of his head.

"Was it something I gave you… back the night we were fighting?" Sunny asked. Basil didn't respond. "I saw that your old shirt was in the bathroom, and it had a lot of blood in it." He continued.

*Basil's hands started shaking slightly.*

"May I see it? The cut?" Sunny inquired.

"N-No Sunny, come on… that's embarrassing…" The blonde quietly complained.

Sunny frowned. It somehow **wasn't** embarrassing when Basil was the one lifting **his** shirt? Basil saw the way his friend was looking at him and held his hand out in front of Sunny's face, concealing himself. "I just want to make sure you're alright. I know you said you were, but…" Sunny trailed off. Basil lowered his hand and nodded.

"I'll… I'll show you sometime later, okay?" He shamefully mumbled.

Sunny nodded back, trying not to think of anything weird. He could respect Basil's privacy. As long as he was okay.

The pair returned to listening to the sounds outside. The wind whipped against the side of the building. Sunny began to grow more worried. If additional snow kept piling up, would the people who worked here even come back?

Sunny took note of a small stack of books that Basil had placed by the bedpost. The blonde quietly picked up one of them and flipped it open. Basil noticed Sunny glancing over at him. "There was a bookcase in one of the living room displays." He explained. "Most of these seem pretty old, but it's something to do." Sunny watched Basil silently turn through the pages, eyebrow mildly furrowed in concentration. He was reading through a worn book that described the ecology of various exotic animals.

The two spent a few more minutes in silence before Sunny finally spoke up. "Will you read to me? Like you used to?" He requested. His friend closed the book and turned quickly to face him. Basil's cheeks flushed.

"I d-don't know Sunny… it's been a long time and I'm pretty t-tired right now after everything…" Basil explained. "M-Maybe I could read to you another day?" He suggested. Sunny nodded.

The black-haired boy slumped back into the pillows. That was okay. Basil had definitely been through a lot and probably needed time to recover from everything. It was selfish of him to ask Basil to expend the effort to read him something aloud just because he was bored. Sunny would just try to go back to sleep. Maybe if he slept more he could heal quicker and wouldn't continue being so useless. Sunny laid back and started to count Humphreys in his head. One Humphrey, two Humphrey, three Humphrey…

Alright, this wasn't working. Too creepy.

Sunny turned a little with his eyes still closed, trying to find a more comfortable position. His head hurt. It was too cold.

Growing agitated, he flopped himself back around again. Sunny felt like he was about to groan in frustration when a sudden sound perked his ears.

*Basil had started speaking.*

"-Having evolved to live in the tall grass of the savannahs, maned wolves have a thick red coat, tall legs and large, powerful ears. The maned wolf is the largest canid found in South America. Neither a true fox nor wolf, they are the sole member of their genus, Chrysocyon. Uh... *Crysockon?*" Basil attempted.

Sunny opened his eye and glanced over at Basil. His friend glanced back at him, the blonde's cheeks turning a soft pink again. Basil scratched the side of his face with his finger, then opened his mouth and continued.

"-They hunt small mammals such as rodents and rabbits. The wolves tap on the ground with a front foot to flush out the prey and pounce to catch it, or they may dig after burrowing animals. Maned Wolves are also known to leap into the air to capture birds and insects... Long legs help them move through and see above tall grasses while on the lookout."

"Check it out, Sunny-"

Basil held the open book in front of Sunny and the teen squinted. It was some kind of dog-like beast with long black legs. Almost like a giant fox on stilts. Basil held out his flashlight so that Sunny could get a better view of the page.

Basil pulled the book back and let out a small smile. He resumed reading and Sunny watched him speak in silence. Basil's face shifted slightly as he read, emphasizing certain words or expressing amusement at various facts as he spoke them aloud. Sunny smiled softly. He had really missed this.

He could almost imagine himself as a kid again, relaxing in a pillow fort as he listened to Basil enthusiastically revisit the events of a novel he had been reading. The blonde's face beamed with excitement, soaking in the joy of sharing something he loved with his best friend. Sunny wondered how many more days like that there could have been if he had simply controlled himself the night everything ended. He cared about all of this... all of *them* so much, and he had ruined every second of it. Destroyed his friend's lives.

Sunny felt a tear start to build up in his eye. He tried to hold it back but he couldn't.

“-and that’s why they are now a protected species in some… Sunny?” Basil abruptly stopped himself, taking note of his friend’s face.

Sunny squeezed his eyelids shut and felt a tear roll down his cheek.

“Hey! Sunny what’s wrong?” Basil quickly shut the book and scooted over to the other side of the bed. “S-Sunny, why are you crying? Is your head still hurting? I can give you more of the medica-“

Sunny suddenly reached out and grabbed his friend’s hand. He feverishly rubbed his thumb over every tiny fold of skin on Basil’s palm, as if the boy he touched was going to disappear. Sunny was immediately struck with the horrifying feeling that he was back in one of his dreams again. Basil's mouth fell open in shock.

His friend **was** going to disappear. Basil was going to vanish like always and Sunny would never be able to find him. Sunny didn’t have Aubrey or Hero or Kel with him anymore. If he lost Basil now he would never see him again. He had left Basil behind, and Basil was going to do the same to him. It’s what he deserved.

Sunny wanted to say something, but he couldn’t. The hundreds of thousands of words he wanted to say were all caught in his throat at once. This was going to be his last chance to say any of those things to the person he had spent years searching for, and he couldn’t even manage that. Sunny’s body trembled as he choked back a sob.

Basil used his index finger to softly catch a tear as it trailed down Sunny’s cheek. Sunny opened his eye.

Basil was still there, looking down over him with damp blue eyes, sad smile hanging somberly across his face. Sunny wasn’t sure if anything he had ever seen was as captivating as the person who sat before him. Every detail of Basil’s soft expression seemed to have been painted by the sorrowful hands of mourning angels and guilt-ridden demons. Even the bruise that lingered over his friend’s eyelid was achingly beautiful.

“It’s okay, Sunny. I’m here with you. I’m here…” Basil whispered softly over his friend’s head.

Sunny kept trying and failing to choke back his sobs. Both of them sat quietly together as Sunny shed his inescapable tears onto the blankets. Basil didn’t say anything more, but Sunny felt as if his wordless touch spoke volumes. After Sunny had finally calmed down, Basil moved back to his side of the bed and turned away from Sunny, lying on his side.

“Thank you, Basil.” Sunny said.

“D-Don't worry about it, Sunny. You know I don’t mind, r-right?” He whispered back.

He knew Basil couldn’t see him, but Sunny nodded his head. The room fell silent.

Sunny's mind was peaceful now. More so than it had been for longer than he could remember. It was thanks to Basil. He always seemed to know what to say and what to do. Sunny wished he could do something back for him. Lately, he'd been little more than a burden to them both.

The black-haired teen tried to ignore his surge of self-loathing and instead focused on warm and fuzzy feeling building inside his head. Sunny's tired brain was now ready to fall asleep again. His consciousness started to softly fade into the shadows...

*But something felt wrong.*

Sunny opened his eye. He looked over at His friend's back. No movement. Basil must be really tired now.

Sunny closed his eye once more and tried to drift off to sleep, but the feeling came back again. Something isn't right.

…

Sunny raised his lids and glanced back over at Basil once more.

Basil's shoulders were shaking. He was crying.

…

"…Basil?"

*"I don't understand…"* Basil spoke towards the wall, his voice barely audible. Sunny froze, suddenly feeling somewhat afraid. Basil's tone was so broken compared to what it was like just a moment ago.

*"W-Why are you acting like this? Why are you t-treating me like this?"* The blonde asked.

Sunny didn't understand.

*"Don't you hate me?"* Basil said, his tiny voice cracking in the shadows.

Hearing that question made Sunny feel sick to his stomach. He felt like someone had just poured broken glass into his insides. *How? How could Basil even think that?* Sunny almost said something back but he stopped himself.

Instead, he slowly scooted over to Basil and silently wrapped his arm around Basil's chest from behind. Basil didn't move away, but he twitched slightly. Sunny could hear him taking heavy breaths as his tears landed on the bed.

"I don't hate you." Sunny whispered.

*"I'm so, so sorry, Sunny…"* Basil's voice trembled.

Sunny said he was sorry too. The wind howled.

*I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.*

The two of them continued like that for a long time, softly apologizing back and forth in the darkness, until Sunny's consciousness finally faded away.

# Executioner

Basil didn't have friends before he met them. To him, friendship was the kind of thing that only really existed in stories. It was something he loved in those books, but he couldn't imagine that he would ever have friends like those five.

They were so… kind. Supportive. They didn't think Basil was strange or call him names. At first, he could barely stand to believe that people like that would like *him.* The five of them were so admirable, wonderful and precious to Basil. After meeting his new friends, Basil's previously dull world was now bursting with so much color it hurt to look at. He didn't know that life could feel this way.

He would wave them goodbye to the sound of "see you tomorrow!" A sound so beautiful Basil felt he might break apart. Really? They'd… *see him again tomorrow?*

He wondered if his friends would make fun of him if they knew. If they knew that hearing those words would make him cry. That he would hide his head under the covers and weep at the thought of it.

He'd return to his house, to his room, and more than ever before it would feel empty. Basil would feel how dull his previous life now felt. His life before them. It was like standing near the warmth of a burning fire, only to step away and feel the frigid cold a thousand times worse than before.

*That's the first time Basil felt it. The fear. A kind of creeping, gnawing disease that slowly took root in the dark corners of his mind.*

What if they finally decided they were sick of Basil? Sick of how he rambled and stuttered… just completely tired of him.

Could Basil even go back now? To a world without them? To a world without those colors?

*Would he be able to keep living like that? After knowing what he had lost?*

So he started taking pictures. Pictures of what he had become so terrified of losing. Pictures to immortalize the happiness he had felt. To prove that it was real.

When Aubrey first introduced everyone else, one in particular stood out to Basil. A bit more than the others. It was as if the two of them… understood each other in a way. It might have been wrong to have a favorite, but that was what Sunny became.

Eventually, Sunny would stop being a friend and become a **best** friend. Something Basil couldn't imagine he'd have in a million years. His problems, his hopes, his dreams… Sunny knew them all. Sunny was always there for him. Someone Basil could count on above all else.

*Sunny was a good person.*

Basil knew Sunny had to have some idea of what he felt about himself. Even when they were young, Basil had considered the possibility of... *leaving*. He wouldn't have to tolerate the lonely days and empty thoughts anymore. Basil wouldn't have to wonder if his parents were coming home for his birthday this year. He wouldn't have to worry that Grandma might eventually forget his name.

Before he had met them, that fate had felt inevitable. It was just the natural kind of end for a person like him. Meeting his new friends put a powerful seal over all of that. So for a while, those thoughts vanished from Basil's mind. They simply faded away while he was busy drowning in his newfound happiness.

But eventually, alongside that growing, gnawing fear, those old ideas reemerged.

He had memorized the pattern of the knot inside and out. Basil could tie it together when he closed his eyes. It was a backup plan. If it ever became too much, he could leave it all behind. Basil figured they would probably be better off without him, in all honesty. They were such a loving group of friends, and Basil was just an unnecessary stain on all of that. The person who didn't belong.

Basil was always the one watching from a distance, longingly smiling and begging the universe to let him be there with them, if just for another moment. Taking desperate photos of a world he was so afraid to lose, as if he had already known from the beginning that it was all too good for him. *He was right.*

*Basil was a creepy, loathsome, jealous person.*

He was jealous of Kel and Hero's parents, who always seemed to be around.

Basil was jealous of the kind of love that Hero and Mari seemed to so effortlessly share with each other. A kind of love someone like him would never have.

He was jealous of the way that Sunny looked at Aubrey. *It wasn't fair.* Basil wanted Sunny to look at him like that, too.

The flower boy loved all five so much it burned inside him, and yet all he could think of was how he was nothing like them.

**And then it happened.**

When she fell, Basil was horrified. He could barely believe that what he had seen was real. The sound her body had made when it finally came into contact with the floor still stuck with Basil after four years. A kind, smart, beautiful girl that they all looked up to was now a lifeless piece of meat sprawled upon the ground.

However, the most horrific fact was that in spite of the strangling fear, Basil was not quite as shaken as he should have been. It was almost as if he knew deep inside himself that something like this was bound to happen. That a story this perfect could never have had a happy ending.

It was that hint of composure that let him do it. That let Basil speak those words he said. Let him suggest such a thing to his best friend. An idea that should have never been spoken.

*They carried her back down. Basil and Sunny's descent into hell.*

Every step felt like inching towards an unfathomable nightmare.

Basil was desperate. Desperate not to lose it all. If Basil couldn't keep all his friends, then he would at least keep Sunny.

He would never forget the texture of the rope in his hands. The way her arms felt limp and lifeless. The sound of what was once a person now blowing in the wind.

*If only they hadn't looked back. If only the two of them had just walked back inside...*

Looking at those photos used to make Basil cry. They still did, but now for even more painful reasons. He had dug and clawed and kicked and screamed into the dirt, begging for a way to escape what he had done.

That's why Sunny was so kind to him right now despite everything. Sunny might've hated Basil, but he never wanted him to hurt himself. They had been best friends after all, and Sunny wouldn't want his friend to suffer like that. Which is why Sunny had been holding it all back. That was why Sunny was so gentle and caring towards him, why he said he didn't hate him.

*But Basil knew better.*

Deep down, Sunny hated Basil. Despised him. Basil ruined his friend's life, he took that perfect world the boy had and destroyed it, simply because he couldn't stand the thought of losing him. He had then tried to take Sunny's life, out of a selfish desire to end their shared pain. Basil couldn't leave unless Sunny left with him. Basil couldn't leave Sunny behind to suffer with SOMETHING hanging in the air around him.

And so Basil did what he did. Sunny was a good person. Someone like that would never forgive all those things.

But this had to be a careful procedure. It wasn't enough for Sunny to come to terms with his own resentment, he needed to do it in a way that would allow him to move on from Basil. So that when Basil was… *gone*, Sunny would be able to live a good life without him. He had to see Basil's disappearance as not just acceptable, but **desirable**.

Since Basil knew all of Sunny's feelings already, he would now wait quietly by his friend's side until Sunny was ready to finish their final story together. Sunny wasn't stupid, once he understood what kind of person Basil was he would know exactly how to treat him.

Basil's grandmother was dead and his friends now knew the truth. This was the last thing he had left to accomplish, one final act he could perform in penance. For Sunny. *For Mari.*

Sunny was injured and tired and lonely and scared. Basil could be of use to him right now. He could protect him from whoever or whatever had taken them here. Basil owed his best

friend more than he would ever know, and this was his chance to repay him. It was the only thing that granted him reprieve from the guilt.

Eventually, the dam between them would break loose, and Sunny would admit how much he actually loathed Basil. He would scream and curse at him, telling him that he was evil. He would kick Basil in the stomach and tell him how he had ruined his life. Sunny would screech about how much they had loved her, and how Basil had poisoned all of it. How he had made them believe that she abandoned them. How his family split apart because of him. Sunny would howl every vicious word that had remained unsaid, and Basil would finally break apart for the last time.

Basil would stand silently as Sunny destroyed him. He wouldn't say anything back. It was all true. Basil knew that SOMETHING didn't push Mari, but it didn't matter.

What Sunny had done was an accident. What Basil had done was intentional.

Basil was the convict, Sunny his executioner.

Basil quietly watched over the delicate, softly-sleeping face of the boy who was going to kill him. What a nightmare.

*But there was no one else he would rather spend his final days with.*

# Lost to a Plant

Chapter Notes

I feel like I'm supposed to put *something* in the note box but I don't really know what.

Remember to stay hydrated.

When Sunny awoke, it was still dark outside. The sun had not yet risen. He was still in this godforsaken room. The only visible light was coming from Basil's flashlight which had been left on and pointed towards the wall.

Sunny felt something about his current position was strange and tried to get up. The black-haired teen discovered that he could not. Someone had taken a phone cable and tied Sunny's left wrist to the bedpost. Reentering from the bathroom, the culprit noticed Sunny's sudden struggle.

"**S-Sorry!**" Basil yelped as he ran to undo the restraint around Sunny's hand.

It's just that I left the room a couple more times and I had to make sure you didn't try to walk around again." Basil explained as he quickly unknotted the cord.

"You sleepwalked some when you used to sleep over at my house so I j-just wanted to be safe." Basil claimed.

Sunny blinked. He did? Basil had never told him that. Basil noticed the confused look on his face and nervously chuckled.

"You also uh, used to talk in your sleep." The blonde smirked.

*So did you,* Sunny thought, but he didn't say anything.

"Someone will track us down eventually, we just need to stay safe until then." The flower boy insisted.

Sunny was shocked that Basil had actually resorted to tying him to the bedpost, but he supposed that it made some sense. Basil had only left for a few minutes last time and Sunny had managed to trip and split his own head open. Idiot.

Wait, Basil said he had left again while Sunny was asleep? How had Sunny not woken up when Basil tied him to the bed?

“I’m sorry Sunny, I haven’t managed to find any thicker clothes…” Basil stated, looking solemn. Sunny shook his head. “Don’t worry about it.” He replied.

The two of them spent some time together in silence. After a few minutes had past, Sunny decided he was ready to try standing up again. Basil protested, but eventually settled on allowing Sunny to move under the requirement that the blonde kept an arm under him at all times.

They walked around the room like that, heading in no direction in particular. Given the circumstances, Sunny actually felt quite decent like this. His legs were no more wobbly than they had been upon their arrival. The two of them didn’t really know where they were going or when they were going to stop, so they just drifted from one corner of the room to the next, occasionally spinning around to walk back in the other direction.

Sunny smirked. It was almost like him and Basil were dancing alone together in the darkness.

He suddenly felt his cheeks start to burn. *Why was he thinking up weird stuff like that?*

After a few minutes of awkwardly walking in silence, Sunny noticed that Basil's legs has started shaking a little. “Hey... Basil?” Sunny quietly asked. “Are you okay?”

“Hm? Oh! Y-yeah…” He replied. “It’s just uh, we haven’t had any real food in a while, and I think these drinks have a b-bit too much caffeine for me, haha.” Basil faked a laugh.

Sunny silently nodded. Vending machine snacks were probably not the most nutritious. Sunny had heard that nuts were pretty good for you, but Basil seemed to have started avoiding those for whatever reason. Either way, they didn’t have many left. It was looking like... potato chips and mini pretzels from here on out.

“That map on the wall said there is a faculty dining hall on the floor beneath us, but…” Basil’s voice grew small. “I meant to go and check it out by myself but I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t go down that stairway again…”

“N-Not after last time. I’m sorry.” He finished, looking downcast.

“I can walk again. I’ll go with you.” Sunny suggested.

Basil’s eyebrows furrowed. “Sunny, you are not-“

“I might not be in perfect shape at the moment but you can hold my hand the whole way.” Sunny cut him off. Basil quietly stared him in the face, nervously biting the side of his finger.

“It’ll be just like walking Hector.” Sunny joked. Basil let out a quick smile, but he forced it back down just as fast.

“Alright. B-But we’re coming right back- And **no** going off by yourself…” Basil conceded.

Sunny nodded, and instantly felt a sharp pain move up the back of his skull. Walking was going well, but Sunny’s head still felt horrible.

*That didn't matter.* Sunny didn't want Basil going off by himself anymore. The black-haired teen could pretend his head didn't bother him for now if it meant Basil would let him tag along while they explored the rest of the empty building. After re-wrapping themselves in blankets to preserve their precious hints of warmth, the two of them gathered their flashlights and walked back into the hall.

They decided before beginning their trip that it would likely be best if the two of them stopped for a bathroom break, so they continued down the hall and back into the lobby. The bathroom next to the bedroom display had a functioning faucet but didn't have a functioning toilet. Sunny had learned that the hard way. Oops.

On their way, Basil told him a story about how he had come across a raccoon in the hall while he was on his way to get bandages for him. "It scrambled back towards the first set of offices." Basil explained. Sunny raised his eyebrows.

Once the two of them had reached the restroom, Sunny propped open the door again and waited for Basil to follow him inside, but his friend stayed standing in the hall.

"Don't worry! I'll go after you're done. Y-You can have some privacy…" The blonde nervously asserted.

Sunny furrowed his brow in confusion. What, did Basil not want to go into the bathroom with him?

…

Sunny's face fell into a miserable frown. Yeah. That made sense.

Upon noticing the change in Sunny's expression, Basil opened his mouth as if to say something, but slowly closed it again. He let out a sad smile and stepped back into the hall, gazing wistfully into the distance.

After the two of them had both spent some time alone in the restroom, they started to make their return to the lobby. Basil had spent quite a lot **longer** in the restroom than Sunny. He hoped that his friend wasn't feeling sick. It was very obvious that this situation had been particularly… *stressful* for Basil.

Out of curiosity, Sunny told Basil he wanted to see the rec-room really quick before they headed back. Upon Sunny voicing his interest, Basil suddenly got a strangely panicked look on his face, but seemingly couldn't figure out a way to reject his friend's request. What was Basil hiding?

Against the blonde's quiet complaints, Sunny opened the door into the employee rec-room. He took in the view for a brief second before freezing in place.

There was a snack machine, but it had been smashed wide open. There were bits of broken glass everywhere. All of the snacks were missing, having been relocated elsewhere by a nameless culinary assailant. Sunny whipped his flashlight around the room, taking in the carnage.

Basil's face turned bright red. "T-There weren't enough quarters around and I d-didn't really have the time so I uh-"

"So I uh-" Basil stammered.

Sunny stared down at the broken glass. **Holy shit.**

His curiosity having been sated, the two of them returned to the hall and started walking towards the lobby once again. Sunny tried to keep himself from smirking as Basil forced his face towards the window, steaming with embarrassment.

The two of them traveled slowly through the display room hallway before finally beginning to approach the stairway room for a third time. Sunny could feel Basil's hand start to shake slightly as the two of them grew closer.

At last they reached the stairs. Sunny gazed into the shadows. It was pitch black down there. He pointed the end of his flashlight at the bottom of the steps. Immediately, Sunny felt as if his stomach had shriveled up.

*There was dried blood at the bottom of the staircase. A lot of blood.*

Memories dug their way through Sunny's skull and twisted around his neck, strangling him. He could feel shadows beginning to form together behind his head, staring into his flooded mind.

*There was blood down there. That was Basil's blood. Basil's blood was at the bottom of the staircase. His blood. Basil and Sunny's blood drying together down the steps.*

There were several drops of it running up the staircase from when Basil must've dragged Sunny back upstairs to the bedroom. Sunny felt his throat closing up.

"Don't look at it, Sunny." Basil instructed him. "L-Let's just go down the other side, okay?"

Basil grabbed Sunny's hand and lead him around to the other side of the center guardrail before taking his first step downwards. The two descended in complete silence. Sunny felt like he had forgotten how to breathe. Once they had finally reached the bottom, Basil was pale and gasping heavily.

"S-Sorry, just uh, give me a minute?" Basil asked, taking a seat on the floor.

Sunny stopped. Basil didn't say anything, he just sat there taking labored breaths. Sunny crouched down and sat beside him, listening to his friend's quiet struggle. Maybe this idea was a mistake.

Eventually, Basil stood back up. He shivered slightly, but grabbed Sunny's hand and pulled him back to his feet. Sunny glanced at Basil's face. The blonde smiled slightly. The two of them resumed traveling further into the gaping blackness of the unfamiliar building. Basil had read the layout map on the wall, but navigating through the darkness by themselves was proving to be a bit more difficult than they had anticipated. They walked back up a different staircase.

“I think it’s up this way…” The flower boy stated, pulling Sunny’s arm through an “Employee’s Only” gate. The two of them walked silently through another hallway, this one quite short, before entering a small, windowed room that had an emergency exit door leading back outside.

Sunny squinted. Something green was towering out from a large planter standing a few meters from the dim window.

Basil’s hand suddenly broke away from Sunny’s. The boy quickly moved over to the side of the massive fern.

“Woah!” Basil exclaimed. “I’ve never seen a *Matteuccia* this big before!”

Sunny blinked and flexed the fingers on his now-empty hand. *Did he just lose to a plant?*

“I wonder how they got it to grow so big indoors?” The blonde pondered aloud.

With a sparkle in his eyes, Basil pointed his flashlight under one of the fronds. He tenderly ran his hand under the stem of the leaf, observing its movement carefully. **Hey!**

Having seemingly satisfied his botanical curiosity, Basil finally stood and stepped away from the fronds. He twisted his head to look at Sunny, and tilted his brow in response to the annoyed look on his friend’s face.

*“What?”* Basil asked.

“Oh no.” Sunny monotonously stated. “My best friend has let go of my hand and now I am falling to the floor.” He pretended to tilt himself sideways.

Basil finally seemed to notice, and his face slightly darkened in the shadows. “S-Sorry…” he mumbled, looking away and holding out his hand. Sunny smirked and gave his hand a reassuring squeeze. Basil cleared his throat. Emboldened, Sunny ran his thumb affectionately across the center of Basil’s palm. Basil flinched slightly but didn’t pull away.

To the side of the giant fern stood a large set of double-doors. The two of them walked past their new green friend and unanimously pushed through the gateway.

Very big room. There was a massive window letting a hint of light in from outside which poured over a set of large metal tables that stood in rows, as if waiting anxiously to be reused by a sizable workforce of furniture-toting employees. Sunny took note of a single red plastic cup that had been left abandoned on the table furthest from the door.

On the left, Sunny noticed a meal serving station that would likely have been where employees would line up to receive whatever corporate-mandated, in-house foodstuffs would be available that day. After briefly taking in the room, the two of them made their way towards the countertop.

Sunny stopped and peered into the plastic containers on the other side of the counter. Maybe at one point there had been something edible set up here, but at the moment this serving station went without food. Basil looked past the countertop into the kitchen beyond it, and

recommended the two of them check out the fridges in the back. Sunny tried to open the staff door into the kitchen, but found it locked. Undeterred, the two of them simply began to climb over the bar instead. Sunny smirked to himself. It was like they were committing a crime together.

Well, technically they **were.**

“Be careful, Sunny…” Basil anxiously demanded as he watched his friend climb up the counter alongside him. Sunny felt the sudden urge to say something teasing to his friend, but couldn’t come up with anything before Basil also made his way over the countertop. The blonde quickly grabbed Sunny's hand again as the two of them made their way to the food prep station at the back of the kitchen. Two grey fridges stood side-by-side, awaiting their hungry approach.

Sunny and Basil opened the two fridges in sync, and began to look over whatever remaining foodstuffs had been left to languish in the shadows.

Sunny squinted. A jar of dill pickles, some mustard and mayo, a plastic baggie filled with questionable-looking tomato slices…

“Find anything in yours?” Sunny asked his friend.

“No…” Basil replied. “It just looks like mostly condiments- Oh, hey!”

Basil pulled a small plastic bag out of the adjacent fridge and showed it to Sunny. The black-haired teen pointed his flashlight at the bag and read over the label.

“Carrot-Based GMO-free vegetarian hotdogs” it read.

Basil’s eyes lit up. Sunny’s brows furrowed in anguish as he squinted at the suspicious orange-ish food tubes sleeping within.

Sunny turned his head back to his own fridge and sighed. It was abundantly clear that the contents of these two fridges were not currently stocked to feed anyone, let alone two recently-hospitalized, ravenous intruders.

Sunny leaned down and opened one of the plastic shelves at the bottom of the fridge. He looked over a paper bag labelled “Dennis.” Sunny opened it, but only found the partially-eaten remains of a moldy sub sandwich festering inside. Shouldn’t have forgotten about your meal, Dennis. *Gross.*

Basil abandoned his fridge and began poking around in the cabinets next to the oven. Sunny watched his friend’s hair bounce around in the darkness as he took out the jar of pickles.

“Hey, look!” Basil exclaimed, pulling a small yellow pouch from out of the cabinet. He showed off his next catch to Sunny, who read the label with a feeling of nostalgic disgust. Instant Tofu, it read.

Sunny made a face. Why did it always have to be tofu? It was like some kind of mundane, soy-based curse.

“Too bad we can’t turn on the stove…” Basil dejectedly mumbled to himself. Sunny smirked. What a shame.

Once they had finished looting the fridges and cabinets, the two of them laid out their collection of foods on a table in the dining hall. Basil quietly took the seat opposite Sunny. The blonde removed a small steak knife that he had slipped into his pocket and used it to cut open the container of vegan not-dogs.

Sunny looked over their stolen goods. One jar of dill pickles, a bag of imitation hotdogs, some questionable tomato slices, a bag filled with stale buns, various abandoned condiments, a tinfoil-covered bowl questionably labelled “**SOUP**,” and a white bag bearing the title of *“Tteokbokki,”* whatever the hell that was.

Truly a feast fit for kings.

Unwilling to uncover the **SOUP** bowl out of fear for what he might find living inside, Sunny reservedly allowed Basil to plate him up a room-temperature vegetable hotdog on a stale bun. After watching Basil begin to consume their awkwardly improvised meal, Sunny finally submitted to fate and took a small bite out of his carrot-based food stick.

It wasn’t quite as bad as Sunny was expecting. It definitely didn’t taste like a hotdog, but it didn’t taste like a carrot, either. It was… edible. Sunny eyed the mustard’s expiration date as he listened to Basil read off of the back of the veggie-dog container.

“-Our low-fat, cholesterol-free veggie dogs have 100% natural plant protein produced from sustainable sources, without the harmful chemical preservatives often found in regular hot-dogs.” The flower boy summarized. “Isn’t that great, Sunny?” Basil happily asserted. Sunny smiled to himself. Shut up, Basil.

The two of them continued munching in silence, as had become routine.

Sunny felt like he should make conversation, but found himself floundering to find anything worth talking about. He glanced at Basil’s face on occasion, but every eyeful he stole seemed to make slightly Basil more uneasy. His friend slowly shrunk down, as if trying to quietly disappear into the condiments without Sunny noticing.

Memories of the events that took place earlier that night forced their way into Sunny’s head, causing his cheeks to burn with renewed embarrassment. This bizarre breakfast felt extremely uncomfortable. The black-haired teen glanced at Basil nervously fidgeting once more. The blonde looked as if he might not be able to keep his food down.

Sunny’s mouth was dry. They should have brought drinks with them. The two of them could have eaten a proper meal, but instead Sunny just sat here awkwardly attempting to not make Basil any more uncomfortable than he already appeared to be. There had to be something to talk about. Something that could dissipate this chronic feeling of unease.

Neither Sunny nor Basil were ever typically as talkative as their other friends, but Basil always seemed to open up easily to Sunny if the boy could get him speaking on a topic he was interested in. Sunny also found it a bit easier to talk to Basil than the others, but he

usually took on the listening role as it inarguably fit him better. Sunny tried to think of something to ask Basil about the plant the blonde had gawked at by the door but his train of thought faltered. Everything he knew about plants was just whatever he had managed to absorb from Basil back when their friends used to help him garden. He wasn't exactly an expert. Maybe he should stick to a topic he knows?

Sunny felt a question finally welling up inside his head. He ended up letting it slip out before he could reconsider himself.

“Did uh, did any of our old friends visit you while we were in the hospital?” Sunny asked nervously.

Basil stopped chewing. His shoulders twitched slightly. The blonde quietly stared out the window for a few seconds before responding.

“Kel.” He said, his voice barely more than a whisper.

“Oh. Y-Yeah, he visited me too.” Sunny replied.

The room returned to its previous silence. Basil didn’t say anything else. The quietude felt even more awkward now than it had before.

“S-Sorry.” Sunny mumbled. “I shouldn’t have asked that.”

“It’s okay.” Basil kindly reassured him. Sunny waited again to see if Basil wanted to say something, but the boy just stared over his shoulder and back out the window as if lost in thought.

*“So?”* Basil asked, leaning his elbow on the table. “Is there a reason you never mentioned to me that Kel had talked to you?”

Sunny quietly inhaled, unsure of how to respond. Sunny’s conversation with Kel had not been particularly *bad*, but it wasn’t particularly *good* either.

“What about you? Why didn’t you ever mention that Kel had visited you?” Sunny evasively returned the question.

*“I asked first.”* Basil smirked.

He did ask first. Sunny opened his mouth to speak, choking on the thoughts that tried to escape his head. Basil noticed his friend struggling and looked him in the eyes. The blonde gently placed his chin on his hand and smiled softly at Sunny.

“It’s okay. We don’t have to talk about this right now if you don’t want. You can take your time, alright?” Basil reassured him.

Sunny stared down at his half-eaten hotdog in shame. This was the easiest part of starting to talk about their friends again. Why couldn’t he even manage this?

Without warning, Basil suddenly stood up from the table. He wordlessly picked up his plate before slowly walking over to Sunny's half of the table and taking a new seat by his side.

Surprised, Sunny felt his face heat up again. He turned his gaze towards the blonde's new, more-assertive table position. "Uh… Basil?" He timidly asked.

"D-Don't look over here so much…" Basil mumbled sheepishly, turning his face away so that Sunny couldn't see him. Sunny smirked.

The two of them resumed eating their bizarre meal in silence, but the room felt a little warmer this time. The quiet wasn't quite as awkward as it was before.

Suddenly, the room also seemed a bit *brighter*. The two of them looked out the window in unison. The sun had finally risen, although it still appeared extremely dim through the thick clouds. A new day.

After unwrapping the soup and judging it to be inedible, the both of them concluded their eating and started cleaning up the table. Basil was going to return the stolen condiments to the fridge, but Sunny told him not to bother. The power was out, these leftovers weren't going to last no matter where they ended up. Basil grabbed the small knife that he had used to open the hotdogs and slid his hand under the table, seemingly pocketing it again.

Sunny's heart skipped a beat. Seeing Basil make that motion so silently and casually, as if he was trying to quietly slip the knife back in his pants without Sunny noticing, unnerved him slightly. He then immediately felt somewhat annoyed at himself. *What was he afraid of?* The two of them were in a creepy situation right now, it made sense that Basil might want a weapon to steel his nerves. Besides, Basil wasn't the only one who was carrying a knife around. Sunny had that little army knife he had taken from one of the offices...

Sunny absentmindedly patted his own pocket, feeling nothing. *Okay, maybe he didn't.* What had ever happened to that? Was it still in his old clothes? Maybe he had dropped it somewhere...

*Also, didn't he have a safety whistle that he had picked up in the supply closet before his eye had started bleeding? Where had that gone?*

Ever since Sunny had finally acknowledged the truth behind his sister's death, the feeling of *having forgotten something* filled him with a burning fear, even if it was only something minor. He had been trying to ignore it so far, (to keep himself from panicking in front of Basil) but he couldn't manage to shake the looming, dreadful feeling that one of them had to know something more about how they had gotten here. Waking up in that truck, his mind had felt extremely foggy. For a minute after Basil woke him, he wasn't even sure when they had last spoke. He STILL didn't know for sure what day it was.

"Sunny? Are you okay?" The teen's friend spoke up, breaking Sunny out of his momentary state of confusion. Basil was staring at him, eyebrows knit slightly. "You were kind of zoning out..."

"Yeah I'm fine, Sorry." Sunny responded. "Are you ready to go?" He asked. The blonde nodded.

The two of them stood. “Do you want to return to that bedroom?” Basil asked.

Sunny shook his head. He had been sleeping enough. “You feel like poking around this building a bit more, then?” His friend inquired. Sunny nodded and stole Basil’s hand. Sunny could have sworn the blonde appeared to blush slightly, but maybe that was his imagination.

# Hurt Him Again

Basil started to move a bit faster than Sunny, somewhat dragging him along by his grasp. Sunny watched his friend's fluffy hair sway back and forth as they left the dining hall. Sunny was suddenly struck with an intense desire to touch Basil's head, but he swallowed and pushed the feeling back down. It just looked... *soft.*

They quickly past by the fern again and stopped to gaze out the exit door at all the snow that had piled up outside. Someone would probably need a shovel to conveniently escape out this way. Basil shivered.

Basil and Sunny exited the "Employee's Only" zone and returned back to the sales floor of the building. After poking their heads into a few more empty display rooms, the two of them came across a large space with an exposed concrete floor. It appeared to be some kind of furniture storage area. Racks of pillows were propped up in the darkness alongside sets of kitchen supplies, bathroom toilet setups, a few tables, an abandoned television…

The black-haired teen could practically feel the mundane aura of home repair oozing out of the walls. He couldn't shake the sudden idea that someone was going to jump out from behind a corner and ask them if they wanted to watch a leak get fixed. "Anything you need for your house?" Sunny jokingly asked. Basil scoffed slightly as they walked aimlessly around the room.

Pretending to simply be walking past the pillow racks, Sunny suddenly reached over, grabbed a long, soft cylinder shape and promptly bonked Basil on the head with it. The blonde turned his head violently towards Sunny, mouth agape in spontaneous outrage.

*"There was a fly."* Sunny claimed, deadpan.

Basil quickly ripped the pillow out of Sunny's hand and held it in position to swing at the one-eyed boy's face before stopping himself. "I'll spare you for now on account of your recent brain damage." Basil joked. Sunny smiled.

The two walked together a while longer before ending up in a storage section that seemingly held more outdoors-focused items. Sunny gazed at a round charcoal grill. His mind began to crawl with memories of Hero grilling hamburgers on a cloudless day, Mari and Aubrey sipping lemonade and laughing at Kel's feeble attempt to catch a butterfly in his hands. The cheerful laughter had continued unbroken for only a moment before Kel began trying to catch a wasp instead. Sunny didn't know his sister could still stand up that fast after she had injured her knee.

Sunny had turned his head to look back at Basil as the two of them sat underneath an oak tree. Basil continued speaking enthusiastically about the book he had been reading to Sunny that day. Sunny's friend had yet to notice the sudden commotion in the distance, and the black-haired boy didn't feel like splitting Basil's attention to it. Those four could keep doing whatever it was they were doing over there, Sunny was busy enjoying himself. He closed his eyes and felt the wind blow across his face as he listened to Basil read a bittersweet passage

aloud. The young blonde had a very calming voice, and he always managed to capture the subtle feelings of the characters with quiet, careful empathy. This was nice. *Basil was enjoying himself right now... wasn't he?*

Sunny snapped out of it, returning to the darkness of the empty building. He smiled to himself sadly and felt his stomach twisting into knots. Basil seemed to somewhat pick up on what he was feeling, and squeezed his hand in somber silence. They both continued moving.

Before they left the grill behind, Sunny quickly picked up a pair of abandoned serving tongs and was about to crab-grab Basil in the leg but the flower boy deftly disarmed him before impact. Sunny exhaled in disappointment.

*"Nice try."* Basil teased.

Sunny smiled once more. For a second, it almost felt like the two of them were kids again, each playfully poking at one another out of a softly hidden desire for the other's attention. Sunny still felt that desire for Basil's attention, but the want was stronger now. Less playful, more... *something else.*

Basil looked really… **nice** right now. Smiling like that in the darkness. Sunny gulped. Suddenly he felt really nervous.

Sunny had no idea how the other boy even managed to notice his change in demeanor so fast, but he did. "Hey, are you okay?" Basil asked, a tinge of concern emerging in his voice.

"Yup." Sunny replied. Basil squinted at him.

"Look at that…" Sunny gestured to some random furniture assortment in the distance. Basil turned his head to face what Sunny was pointing to. "What about it?" He asked. Sunny ran through a list of options in his mind, trying to come up with a feasible reason to point out this variable mix of furniture. "Doesn't this remind you of uh… playing cards in the treehouse?" Sunny suggested, awkwardly gesturing towards a coffee table.

*Shit. Why the hell did he say that.*

"Yeah, I guess." Basil replied. Sunny impulsively swallowed again.

Basil frowned. "Sunny, what is the matter with you right now-"

"You know I'd never hate you, right?" Sunny suddenly blurted out.

*Why the hell did he say **that**-*

Basil's eyes flared wide open. "Wh- Why are you-" he stuttered in a panic, his face turning several shades redder. Sunny's friend suddenly looked particularly uncomfortable.

"It's just that last night you asked-" Sunny started.

"*W-Wait!*" Basil cut him off. "T-That was just because I…"

Basil suddenly stopped himself. He quickly removed his hand from Sunny's and forcibly placed it over the other boy's mouth, silencing him.

"Whmth thh hlll, Bsl?" Sunny mouthed into Basil's sweaty hand.

*"Did you see that?"* The blonde whispered. Sunny blinked. See what?

"H-Hello?!" Basil abruptly called out into the shadows. "**Is someone there?!**"

Sunny froze in fear. The shadows returned no answer. For a moment, Sunny and Basil were deathly silent.

"**I SAW YOU!**" Basil yelled an accusation towards the back of the room. The darkness still yielded no replies. Both of them stood with baited breath until they were finally sure nothing was going to speak from the blackness.

Basil's shoulders relaxed a little, dropping his bluff. "I guess it was probably just a raccoon again, haha…" he said with a forced chuckle. Sunny squinted into the darkness. Still nothing moving.

At the very back of the room laid some sort of ramped corridor that must have lead down to a lower level of the storage area. A triangular forklift hazard sign had been hung on the wall, and it vibrantly reflected back the beam from Sunny's flashlight. Whenever neither of them spoke, this building was extremely, eerily quiet.

"I think we should go." Basil abruptly asserted. He grabbed Sunny's hand once more and started pulling him back to the doorway they entered from. "We can poke around down here later if we have to. You need rest." The blonde stated.

Sunny thought of a reply, but he softly bit down on his tongue. Basil suddenly seemed somewhat… *annoyed.* He kept holding on to Sunny's hand, but his grip was kind of uncomfortable.

"Sorry for making things awkward." Sunny dejectedly apologized.

"It's fine." Basil quickly replied, beginning to walk slightly faster. The blonde did not look back at Sunny, his blue eyes firmly glued to the path ahead.

Sunny opened his mouth again. "I just really need you to know that-"

*"Sunny. Please stop talking for now."* Basil rigidly requested. He bit his lip, his voice wavering slightly.

Sunny shut himself up. *Fucking idiot.*

The two of them did not speak anymore, simply making their way back up the statue stairway to the display room they had asserted themselves into previously. They were about halfway up the staircase before Basil suddenly let go of Sunny's hand and turned his head back down the steps. The hairs on the back of Sunny's neck instantly bolted upright as he watched Basil vomit down the stairwell.

“Are you okay!?” Sunny blurted out in a panic.

*“I’m f-“* Basil started, before promptly unloading the contents of his stomach once more. Unsure of what to do, Sunny placed his hand on the blonde’s back, trying to comfort him somehow. Basil retched and coughed in disgust.

“Hold on-“ Sunny said. “I’ll run back to the room and grab you a drink-“

Basil suddenly turned and grabbed his friend’s hand once more. He wordlessly resumed their flight up the stairs, softly dragging Sunny along behind him. Sunny wanted to call out to him, but was still reeling from shock at what he had just witnessed.

The two of them arrived back at the bedroom door. Basil coughed and spoke in a strained voice:

“G-Go back inside.” He said. “I’ll come in after a minute, I just have to run down to the bathroom first. Rinse all this out of my mouth.”

“I’ll go with you.” Sunny offered, already beginning to pull his friend’s hand down the hallway. Basil did not budge.

“Sunny. *Please go inside.*” Basil requested, his tone filled with misery.

Sunny lowered his head and nodded. He put his fingers around the door handle and twisted it, before looking back at Basil as the blonde began to creep slowly down the hall, hand gripping over his stomach.

Upon re-entering the room, Sunny immediately fell to his knees and pulled at his hair in frustration. Small droplets quickly started building at the corners of Sunny’s eye.

*Idiot.* Basil hated him now. Things were already so awkward between the two of them and he had gone and made it worse for no reason. It’s not like any of the questions Sunny was asking would have helped anything anyway. They had no one else to turn to right now, and Sunny had ruined it for the both of them.

Sunny picked up a half-empty bottle of water and sat at the end of the bed, facing the floor. He took a slow drink and considered what he was possibly going to say to Basil once his friend came back inside. He considered what Hero would’ve told him at a time like this. Hero always seemed particularly adept at apologizing, although with him those apologies rarely ever appeared necessary.

Sunny was violently shaken from his thoughts as the display room door swung back open. Basil slowly stepped inside, passing silently through the open sliding door and taking a seat on the side of the bed opposite Sunny as he had before. The black-haired teen watched as his friend grabbed an unopened soda from the side table and cracked the tab, letting out a soft hiss.

“I **really** need to replace the terrible taste in my mouth. Rinsing it out wasn’t good enough...” Basil stated, chuckling awkwardly. The blonde took a long drink from the room-temperature

can before speaking again:

“I’m sorry we haven’t been able to find anyone yet.” He quietly apologized.

“Yeah, but I’m sure someone will show up sooner or later.” Sunny replied, his eyebrows knitting slightly. *Wasn't Basil mad at him? Why was he acting so normal now?*

“Definitely.” Basil replied, scooting a bit closer to his friend. “Your head is probably really bothering you by now, right? You s-should take some more medication...”

Sunny focused on the constant throbbing in his skull. It **was** getting close to unbearable, but Sunny had been too distracted by his conversations with Basil to notice.

“Here, Sunny...” Basil picked up the medicine bottle he had made Sunny drink from before, and quickly twisted off the cap. Sunny read the label: *EXTRA STRENGTH LIQUID PAINKILLER - ADULTS.* Basil picked up the spoon from last time and handed it to Sunny along with the open bottle.

“Unless you’d prefer if I did the airplane again.” Basil teased, smirking slightly. Sunny awkwardly smiled back at him, his cheeks warming. Sunny poured himself a hit of the awful-tasting painkiller fluid and tried to swallow it as quickly as possible before returning to his water bottle to chase the sensation away. It was as if they had tried to make the medicine taste like cherries, but the cherries had been left to fester for a week in a hospital waste bin.

Basil smirked again and took the spoon and medicine away from Sunny. Feeling a bit cold, Sunny positioned himself somewhat uncomfortably under the bedspread. The black-haired teen glanced over at his friend's face, trying to determine the blonde's expression.

“H-Honestly, I really need some of this too.” Basil stated, pouring out another dose onto the same spoon as before. Sunny watched in shock as he quickly swallowed the spoonful of purple fluid. Sunny expected him to react to the indirect kiss, but Basil didn’t seem to display any emotion at all, as if the action he had just taken was of no particular significance. The blonde took another sip of his drink.

Basil stood up and walked over to the large window before abruptly pulling the blinds shut, blocking out the dim hint of morning light as it attempted to invade the room. He flicked his green flashlight off and turned to face Sunny in the now re-shaded space.

“The first-aid kit has a sleeping drug in it that’s supposed to be really strong if you feel like you’re going to be having trouble napping with all that head pain.” Basil stated. “I could get you some, if you’d like!”

Sunny frowned. *Nap?* What was Basil talking about? The sun had only just started rising. “Why are you talking like I’m going to sleep?” Sunny asked. “The sun is coming up, shouldn’t the two of us be waking right now?”

“Oh!” Basil exclaimed. “W-Well of course you don’t have to if you don’t want, I just felt like you might want to rest a bit more because of your injuries.” The blonde plainly stated. “With a bad headache, sometimes its easier to just sleep it off...”

“It’d also probably be a good idea to conserve some heat under the blankets right now, it’s really getting cold in this building…” Basil quietly said, taking a seat back on the foot of the bed. Sunny shivered a little. He was right.

Basil turned to face him again. Sunny felt his breathing hitch for a second. The neutral expression on Basil’s face seemed kind of… strange. *Why was he looking at him like that?*

The blonde began crawling across the bed, slowly making his way back over to Sunny’s side. Sunny thought that he was going to simply sit alongside him as he had done several times before, but this time Basil got close. **Very** close.

Sunny froze, trying again to read Basil’s expression as the flower boy crept silently towards him in the shadows. Basil laid by his side and leaned in towards his body, the blonde’s face now inches from Sunny’s head. Unbelievably, Basil got even closer.

*“Besides, don’t you just feel sooooo tired right now?”* Basil gently whispered into Sunny’s ear. Sunny felt like his heart had just stopped. **What the hell is Basil doing.**

“I… uh-“ Sunny fruitlessly searched for any possible words to react to what had just happened. He considered turning his face to look at Basil, but suddenly found himself petrified by fear. Basil was REALLY close. If he turned his head right now, *what was going to happen?*

Sunny could feel his friend’s breath on his neck. The entire universe seemed as if it had stopped, Basil and Sunny now its sole occupants. *“B-Basil… I’m sorry I said that stuff earlier. I never meant to-“* the black haired boy struggled to form a coherent apology.

Basil moved away slightly, but rotated himself around Sunny’s shoulder so that the black-haired teen could now view his face. The blonde looked somewhat puzzled. “Sorry? Sorry for what?” Basil asked. “It’s not like you did anything wrong.” He reassured him, letting out a soft smile.

“I just thought that-“ Sunny started, his voice shaking. *“Shhhh…”* Basil whispered, silencing him. “We can talk about all of that after you’ve gotten some sleep, alright?” The blonde took a round, blue pill out of his pocket and gingerly placed it in-between Sunny’s lips with his fingers, the boy’s nails gently rubbing against Sunny’s mouth. Sunny felt like his brain was going to implode.

Basil turned his head away from Sunny, saying something about how fast this medication could knock you out if you felt sick while he rearranged the contents of his pocket. He kept speaking, but Sunny was no longer paying attention. Sunny's mind was spinning out of control.

Sunny swallowed the pill. He suddenly felt the urge to scream, but couldn’t quite put his finger on the reason behind that impulse. He was sure of one thing, though:

*Basil was angry.* Sunny didn’t know exactly why, or what about his anger was driving him to act like this, but Sunny was sure. Basil was very upset with him. The black-haired boy almost

never saw his friend like this. Sunny must have said something earlier that had really set Basil off.

As if without any control, Sunny's body suddenly started violently trembling. *Why was Basil talking like this?* This was scary. Why did Basil tie his hand to the bedpost earlier? Was he really so afraid that Sunny would move? Why did Basil slip that knife back into his pocket when they visited the dining hall?

*Had Basil asked if Sunny hated him because he secretly hated Sunny?*

*Basil wouldn't hurt him, right?*

**Again.** Sunny corrected himself. Basil wouldn't hurt him *again*… right?

Still speaking aloud, Basil turned his head back around to face his friend. "-but that's what is really great about these sleeping aids, they immediately take the edge-"

Basil froze mid-sentence after noticing the terrified expression on Sunny's face and the ceaseless trembling in his arms. Basil's eyes shot open wide.

"H-Hey, Sunny? S-Sunny what's the matter? **Hey!** *Say something!*" Basil started shaking his friend's shoulders, panicked.

Sunny stared directly into Basil's eyes, unable to process anything the boy was asking him. *Basil was going to kill him.* Basil was going to stab out his other eye while he slept. Basil was angry. It was Sunny's fault for leaving his friend alone with the truth for so long. All that weight had been hung on Basil's shoulders, because Sunny only ever cared about himself. He had made a promise and broken it. Basil was angry that Sunny left him and now he wanted him gone.

*"Sunny! SUNNY!* ***P-PLEASE SAY SOMETHING!!****"* Basil shouted, his voice falling apart as he grew increasingly hysterical.

Sunny finally snapped out of it, and immediately felt burning tears start streaming down his face. He took in a breath, not having noticed that he had been holding it for so long. *"I'm sorry… Basil I'm sorry, please…"* Sunny begged and cried.

"What? What? Sorry for what?" Basil asked, his hands shaking rapidly as he grabbed at Sunny's shoulders.

*"I didn't mean to make you angry…"* Sunny choked out.

"**I'm not angry!** I wasn't angry! I was j-just trying to… to…" Basil struggled, tears building in his eyes as well.

*"Please don't cry…"* Basil begged him, placing his head on Sunny's shoulder. *"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it… I didn't mean it…"* The blonde feverishly apologized as he wept into Sunny's shirt.

"You're not… mad at me?" Sunny asked, wiping his eyes with his free hand.

“**N-No!**” Basil vehemently denied, staring him in the face with a panicked expression. “I just…”

“C-Can we talk about this later?” Basil requested. “Can’t we just... get some rest for now?” The blonde asked, his voice completely miserable.

Sunny stared at the floor. “Yeah, I guess. If you want to.” The boy mumbled dejectedly.

“N-No! I mean-“ His friend struggled. “I just-“

“You know I really care about you, right?” Basil blurted out. *“...a lot?”*

Sunny felt his face suddenly grow very warm. He nodded, and Basil's panicked expression diminished slightly.

“…and **you** know I’d never hate you, right?” Sunny quietly asked, incapable of meeting his friend's eyes.

Basil opened his mouth as if to reply but shut it again, stuck in thought. "...Yeah. Yeah I know you don’t. *I’m sorry...*” The blonde apologized as if convincing himself. A solitary tear rolled down Basil’s cheek.

The two of them laid side-by-side, the sudden silence only occasionally broken by a quiet sniffle or choked sob.

*“...We’re really bad at this, huh?”* Basil somberly asked him.

“Bad at what?” Sunny replied, wiping his eyes a second time.

“Being friends again.” Basil stated, staring sadly at their feet.

Sunny couldn’t bring himself to say anything. Basil seemed to be at least a little bit correct.

After another moment passed in silence, Sunny spoke. “But we only just s-started talking again, right? And after everything that’s happened, don’t we have the right to suck at this? Especially right now... the situation we're in...”

Basil firmly nodded. “Yeah. That is true.”

Sunny felt the pain in his head start to abate, the insides of his skull suddenly starting to feel still and empty. The drugs Basil had given him were beginning to take hold. Basil was right. This stuff was strong.

Images of Sunny and Basil's shared childhood memories flickered through his mind. *Could they really still do that?* Could either of them manage to be anything more like they had used to be? Basil was always struggling. Sunny kept breaking apart. There had to be something more he could say, something that would underline how badly Sunny had missed him...

“**You** aren’t mad at **me**, are you? For… *being weird?*” Basil asked, nervously eyeing his friend’s expression.

“No.” Sunny confidently stated. “But I’m afraid whatever you just gave me is about to destroy what little conversational ability I have left.”

Basil chuckled, a small, pensive smile slowly growing across his face. “Sweet dreams, Sunny.” He whispered.

*“No… I don’t want to. I want to talk more…”* Sunny childishly mumbled, trying to fight off the clouds that were building inside his mind.

“I’ll be right here when you wake up.” Basil quietly reassured him, and the boy once again felt his consciousness fade into the darkness.

# Basil Comforts

Basil stared over his friend's now-sleeping face and felt his blood slowly squirm through his veins with an icy chill. *What the hell was he doing?* He was making everything worse. His ridiculous attempts at maintaining some semblance of aloofness had only horrified his friend all over again. Basil kept justifying his own behavior by saying he was doing it for Sunny, but in reality he was just weak and selfish. He kept trying to hold Sunny at arms length because he was afraid of how much more it would hurt when Sunny finally grew sick of his poisonous presence.

As if that pain was something he could just avoid by choosing to. As if it wasn't something he *earned*.

Basil moved away from Sunny's sleeping body, back to his side on the opposite end of the bed. He shouldn't even allow himself to sit so closely. Terrible fears soaked the back of the blonde's brain. Basil stood up slowly, as to not disturb the mattress Sunny was sharing with him. He walked over to the door and locked it as silently as possible.

When Sunny fell again, Basil had searched for that godforsaken key everywhere and hadn't managed to find it. If **anyone** could get in here, it would probably only be an employee who had this particular room's key in their own possession. This door would likely lock out 99% of the world.

For a brief second, Basil had felt sure he saw something in the storage room the two of them had been poking in earlier. Something moving around in the darkness.

But of course, Basil feeling as if he saw something that wasn't actually there was nothing new. It was entirely possible that he had started horrifying himself for absolutely no reason, simply stewing inside his own mind as the result of his twisted fantasies and hurting Sunny with his unnerving behavior. When he cried out into the darkness, nothing responded. Nothing **moved**, either.

The blonde knew he was beginning to come apart. His own brain was beginning to play twisted tricks on him again. Since they had arrived here, Basil had not really slept much. **At all.** He tried to tell himself he was behaving irrationally but he couldn't convince his fear.

*Basil didn't want Sunny to be awake right now, for Sunny's sanity as well as his own, so he tried to convince him to sleep.* Sunny had been horribly injured several times and was in terrible need of rest. If someone or something in here tried to hurt them, Sunny would likely not even be able to run away by himself. Basil sat on the floor next to the now-locked door and pulled the serrated knife out of his pocket. *If worst came to worst, running wasn't an option.*

Basil fought back the desire to sleep. They were probably safe, but he still shouldn't let his guard down...

Given how miserable he felt, it was a wonder that Basil was able to fall asleep at all, but his body had grown exhausted. He was struck with intense shame for having scared his friend, and that guilt now seeped into his dreams. On that cold morning, sitting upright on the floor, Basil dreamt of the aftermath. He dreamt of the pain he had felt back then, and the pain he had created.

*Sunny came over a few times.*

Basil had explained to his grandmother what had happened with Sunny's family. He explained that his sister had suddenly taken her own life on the night of their recital. It was the first instance of a terrible lie that Basil would find himself recounting dozens of times over the next four years.

Basil's grandmother was very understanding. She would allow Basil to bring Sunny over and gave them the space she knew the two of them needed. The fact that Basil's group of friends had fallen apart overnight made the blonde's grandma cry in grief for him, but it's not like Basil deserved it. He was the one who had ensured things would end up this way. He had, by his own hands, guaranteed that he would ultimately end up alone again.

*But not completely alone.* At that time, Basil at least still had *him*. He still had Sunny, and he was going to keep him no matter what.

Sunny never came over on his own. Basil had to reach out for him. He had to go to the black-haired boy's house himself, and softly pull him out of his room by the arm, as if still leading Sunny back through the sliding door on that accursed night.

Sunny's family was so stricken with grief that they barely ever seemed to acknowledge Basil. Walking through that familiar living room, past that same old television and orange carpet stain, it all felt like some kind of nightmare. Seeing a place that used to be home to so many of his happiest memories become like this was something Basil's mind couldn't accept. It was almost as if it couldn't possibly be real.

But then Basil would pass through that doorway… see that staircase… *and he would know.* He would know that all of it was all too real, and that every second of it would stay burned into his memory for as long as he lived. The boy felt as if it was something terribly twisted that he could even bring himself to still walk up those same stairs at all after what he had done, but there was no other choice. He had to see his best friend.

Basil would never have to speak. Sunny would know immediately when he knocked on the door who it was and what they wanted. The blonde's friend grew increasingly pale as time went on. Sunny's face had long rejected its namesake. Basil's friend held nothing but cold indifference towards his own health. While alone, Sunny would never make even the slightest effort to keep himself together.

And so, Basil would forcibly take him by the arm and guide him down that accursed stairway, back out the front door and into a world that Sunny no longer cared about.

Their walks down the street were always acted out in mutual silence. Basil tried not to let the cold indifference get to him. Instead, he pointed his attention outwards to the familiar and

unchanging world which surrounded them. Sometimes Basil would glance at the somber glow of the sun setting, or listen to the soft rustling of the leaves as they fell gently from their branches.

Halloween was approaching soon, but there was really no reason to look forward anymore.

If he focused hard enough, Basil could almost still hear the now long-passed conversations and joyful laughter as if it had all just happened. The blonde could practically see their ecstatic faces. He could easily recall the elation he felt upon seeing Sunny wrapped up like a cartoonish mummy. His friend's tired demeanor really sold the act. Looking back, Basil's angel costume felt like some kind of cruel joke now. The gardener felt tears build in the corners of his eyes.

*The six of them all had such fun last year, hadn't they?*

Eventually, the pair would finally reach Basil's door. Sunny would never say anything. He'd just follow Basil up to his room and slowly break apart.

Sunny seemed to have difficulty crying about Mari's death at home. Maybe it was the guilt. Maybe he couldn't allow himself to cry in the presence of his parents while carrying the knowledge of what the two of them had done.

But alone in Basil's room, things were different.

Sunny's sudden weeping and sobbing would reverberate through the air and scrape at the walls. Every second of that horrid sound made the blonde feel as if this really was it: the world the two of them were born into was finally coming apart at the seams... a grand theatre that had now reached its final act. The first time Basil heard Sunny like that, the two of them had the house to themselves. It had scared him terribly. Sunny was always such a quiet person, but not then. Not anymore.

Basil wept with him, trying to offer words of comfort but every desperate statement only seeming to fall upon deaf ears. The blonde couldn't blame his friend, those somber speeches he gave felt false even to himself. Sunny used to sleep with his sister when he had nightmares, but now he had their previously-shared bedroom all to himself. It was obvious to Basil that Sunny had scarcely been eating or sleeping. The boy would collapse on his floor in exhaustion, incapable of doing anything but shedding empty tears.

Basil would always try to get Sunny to rest in his bed after he felt the boy couldn't weep any longer, but those attempts to alleviate his friend's suffering would never be enough. Regardless, they were all Basil was capable of. He would put his hands on Sunny's, and guide him to a soft mattress where the gentle lull of unconsciousness could provide a temporary respite from himself. One could tell just by looking at Sunny that the weight of his loneliness and loss was eating him from the inside out. *Sunny would never fall asleep unless Basil remained in the room.*

Those nights were when Basil first felt it growing. A new, horrible pain whose thorns would twist themselves in circles around his lungs.

Basil had thought that after what he had done to Mari, that would have been the most he would ever hate himself in his life. **He was wrong.** Basil was so much worse than he thought he was. Somewhere deep down, deep inside himself, Basil felt something unforgivable. Deep in that darkness, Basil felt the flickering of a faint spark of happiness... *and he loathed himself for it.*

He felt a tiny flicker of joy at the fact that Sunny would finally rely on him now. That Sunny would open up and show such powerful, hidden emotion around him. Basil felt a microscopic hint of happiness at the idea that he was still a person Sunny could turn to, even after everything he had done.

He was something truly awful. Basil was a sick, horrible creature... *and this was the proof.*

The flower boy would ignore those positive whispers and quietly fight back the urge to vomit at the thought of it all. He ceaselessly struggled to push his swirling emotions back down. Basil attempted to turn his focus outside himself once more.

Tonight, Sunny was behaving even more strangely. It seemed as if his previous shattering could not be undone this time. Basil tried to get him to sleep, but the other boy simply could not do it. After a couple hours spent writhing and suffering, Basil's grandma gave Sunny some kind of tea she said would help him wind himself down.

It was something she had given him to *"help the boy calm down a bit."*

Basil knew grandma was trying to help in her own way, but whatever she had given him had seemed particularly… *intense.* Watching the other boy grow still, Basil felt like maybe it was a bit too much for Sunny. His breaths gradually slowed but they were each just as labored as before.

His grandpa having left them long ago, Basil's grandmother was clearly no stranger to the crushing pain of losing someone close to you. This must have been one of the ways she had coped with that pain. The blonde laid down next to Sunny in his bed, caressing his friend's hand and trying to provide him some kind of comfort from the growing darkness that seemed to leak out from the room around them and hang in the air. The newborn tendrils of SOMETHING insidious.

Sunny no longer squirmed and trashed, but his behavior had become somewhat strange. Basil's friend was not going to sleep in a peaceful way, he was actively fighting it off. The blonde would try to ask him if he needed more blankets… more pillows… but the boy did not respond to his inquiries. Basil's friend sat up and hovered over him, wobbling slightly from side to side as the occasional tear slid down his cheek. Sunny was growing increasingly delusional, smiling and crying and muttering to himself, grabbing at Basil's arms with some kind of greedy shadow lingering in his eyes. Sunny's usually calm demeanor had been completely dissolved by mindless, broken hysterics.

Basil could scarcely speak, so he just silently stared at Sunny's face, trying to pick apart his friend's intentions from the subtleties in his tired expression. He couldn't. Sunny kept touching Basil and crying.

*The way Sunny was touching him felt wrong.* Something about the way his hands ran across Basil's torso was distinctly unsettling. The flower boy needed to ask him to stop, but couldn't manage to bring those words to escape his lips. Whatever Sunny was doing, he probably wouldn't remember it. That's what Basil told himself. That's how the blonde justified letting it continue. He had to know what was going to happen next, and hated himself for it.

*If Basil kept letting Sunny touch him like this, where were his hands going to end up?*

The emotions hiding in Sunny's expression kept fluttering back and forth as he mumbled incomprehensibly. He seemed both happy and afraid, *wide awake and barely conscious.* Sunny no longer actively sobbed, but his eyes still steadily dripped out empty tears. Basil kept letting his friend's fingers run across whatever they wanted. The black-haired boy gently scratched across Basil's ribs. Sunny's eyes had glazed over, his face almost expressionless now.

*Basil felt his shoulders begin to shake slightly. Why couldn't he just stop this from happening? The longer it went on, the more unsure he became if it was Sunny who was doing something wrong right now, or if it was himself.*

*"Over... together..."* Sunny nonsensically muttered.

Sunny's hands started moving lower, and Basil's heartbeat had now almost tripled. The blonde gasped weakly as Sunny slid a curious hand *under* his shirt. The hand began to climb back up Basil's torso once more, this time rubbing silently across his flesh. Basil didn't know being touched by another person could feel this way.

Basil felt like he was going to cry. Why did Sunny's hands feel like this? Why did he want to keep feeling this? Basil didn't deserve to enjoy anything after what he did. Whatever this was, it shouldn't be happening.

Basil suddenly noticed a change. Sunny's hands began to grow weak, the boy's eyelids drooping and fluttering. Sunny wasn't going to be able to continue staying awake for much longer.

Sunny suddenly collapsed forwards onto Basil, smearing his mouth across Basil's neck. He mumbled something incomprehensible, and rubbed his lips up and down the boy's skin as he fruitlessly tried to speak once more. Sunny laid by his side now, but he was still close enough that his mouth invaded Basil's exposed neck.

Eyes wide, Basil slid a trembling hand around Sunny's head and gently *pushed him deeper into his skin*, desperate to feel some form of affection, even if it was fake. Basil was taking advantage of his weakness. What he had justified as trying to comfort Sunny had turned into the blonde comforting himself.

"Everything's going to be okay, Sunny... *isn't it?"*

*Basil whispered a question into the indifferent silence which lingered in his bedroom, but there was no one left awake to answer him.*

...

*Shortly thereafter, Sunny would stop answering Basil's pleas for his attention. The blonde would one day find that his precious photo album had been defaced, and the culprit had shut himself away forever. Sunny wrapped himself in a cocoon of quiet hatred, blocking out every last whisper from the world outside. The doors had been sealed, and he was never coming back out. That stinging loneliness Basil had feared for so long would then bleed out of his heart in a ceaseless torrent.*

*But on this one particular night, despite his desperate pleas against himself, Basil felt an unwanted hint of happiness. An undeserved moment of twisted comfort. It would be the last time he would experience such a thing for many years to come.*

*The blonde laid silently next to the beautifully sleeping form of his grief-stricken best friend, and felt a single, undeserved tear roll down his cheek.*

"Mari, please... help me..."

*Basil was a monster.*

# Sunny Comforts

Sunny's morning nap had not lasted long. His eyelids reopened only a few hours later, and he was immediately shaken wide awake by thoughts of what him and Basil had shared with each other right before he had fallen asleep. He felt a soft buzzing in his cheeks that only grew stronger the more his brain spun back into motion. *Uh oh.*

Sunny quietly glanced over at the other side of the bed that was once again currently occupied by his best friend. Basil was already wide awake and barely appeared to have slept at all. The bags under his eyes had only grown worse. Sunny wondered to himself if Basil had noticed he was looking or not. The blonde awkwardly scratched the side of his nose.

At the very least, Basil definitely seemed aware that he was awake, but neither of them had acknowledged each other verbally yet. They both laid silently on opposite sides of the massive mattress, occasionally tossing around or fidgeting to themselves.

Sunny glanced over at Basil again, and this time he caught the flower boy stealing a glance at **him**. Basil immediately turned his head back towards the blackened television screen, seemingly in a feeble attempt to cover up the fact that he had just been looking. Sunny also quickly turned away out of a shared sense of embarrassment. *Oh no.*

Sunny felt his breath quicken a bit. This was really bad. Someone needed to say something.

Sunny felt like an idiot for what had happened earlier. Why had he thought Basil was trying to hurt him? Basil had done nothing but feverishly apologize for Sunny's injuries ever since they were hospitalized. To suspect Basil would want to hurt him again after all the suffering and guilt the blonde had clearly gone through was horrible of him. Sunny was being completely unreasonable...

*Or maybe it wasn't that easy.* Maybe even though Sunny consciously knew that Basil would likely rather die than hurt him again, his subconscious and muscle memory could not be so easily convinced. Sometimes, when Basil moved in a certain way, or made a particular expression, Sunny felt his throat start to close up. Like he was still in that room, on that night. Like they were still fighting. He just couldn't help himself.

The feeling would always flicker away quickly, but the lingering tendrils of that fear still slipped in and out of Sunny's mind even in his best moments.

*Sunny wondered if Basil felt that, too.*

The teen withheld his urge to glance over at Basil again. Since the events earlier that morning, things had clearly become increasingly awkward between the two of them, even more so than before. It was as if every step they took towards being comfortable around each other again was immediately accompanied by two additional steps backwards. This situation was steadily growing into something untenable. The two of them couldn't keep continuing on like this. Their conversations needed to become more natural, like they used to be. They *had* to.

But Sunny was not a conversationalist. He never was. Trying to climb across the chasm that had opened up between the two of them felt like an insurmountable effort. Whatever words left his mouth would fall right over the edge and likely drag him along by the tongue.

***Think***. His other friends would have been able to handle this easily. *What would Kel do?*

Kel would probably crack a sly joke that would make Basil smile. He'd immediately wriggle across the bed to his friend and give them a playful poke in the ribs. Kel would snicker and Basil would snicker back, the tension between them having been completely dissolved in an instant. Easy.

Sunny tried to imagine himself sneakily moving over and poking Basil in the ribs right now. He felt as if the blonde would probably just freak out and die of a heart arrhythmia.

...

*What would **Hero** do?*

Hero would probably get Basil's attention by asking him a seemingly mundane question that he would then immediately use to trick the flower boy into joining a string of casual conversations about nothing in particular. Once the air had been expertly cleared of any previous awkwardness, Hero would offer Basil something to eat and make a lighthearted joke that would instantly get him to open up about whatever had been lingering on his mind. Basil would leave the conversation feeling much better than before, Hero's signature messy hair would sparkle from his boundless charm, and the curtains would fall. Roll credits.

Sunny's *eye* rolled. Trying to imagine himself maneuvering through this social interaction as smoothly as Hero felt even more ridiculous than picturing himself as Kel. Hero could probably run over a police officer and then convince the officer's partner to let him drive away a free man. *Everybody* loved Hero. Sunny would never be able to break the ice with Basil like that. Most of the social ability which Kel's brother carried so effortlessly was irreplicable. Sunny quietly sighed to himself.

…

*What would Aubrey do?*

Basil and Aubrey had always been close before. Aubrey was the one who introduced Basil to the rest of the group, so she had technically known him longer than anyone. Even after the both of them were established members of their circle of friends, Sunny would still occasionally catch Aubrey whispering into Basil's ear, the two of them sharing some unspoken secrets and quietly restraining laughter between themselves. Sunny had always loved seeing them like that (even if he wished he was kept in the loop of whatever it was they were being so sneaky about).

Sunny thought about what Aubrey and Basil's relationship looked like *now* and felt as if he was going to throw up. Memories forced their way into his head and scraped against his insides. He could feel the sensation of liquid filling up his lungs, desperately flailing his

limbs in a feeble attempt to save Basil from drowning in the uncaring watery depths of the lake. They both could have died that day.

*Aubrey had tormented Basil.* Abused him. Hurt him. Convinced other people to view him as trash treat him as such. All of that was Sunny's fault.

Aubrey now knew the truth like the rest of their friends, but Sunny still hadn't told her that it was **him** who ruined the pictures in Basil's photo album. The inciting incident of her anxious hatred was entirely Sunny's own doing. **He** was the reason she had tortured Basil for so long.

Compared to the weight of what happened to Mari it felt almost irrelevant at the time, but it wasn't. Sunny should have told her. If he had told her back then she would have already forgiven Basil. After all, it was Sunny's fault that Mari was gone. Sunny had ruined their relationship **again**. It was the only thing he was good at.

Sunny imagined the horrifically sickened look that grew on Aubrey's face when he said what the two of them had done. Once Sunny could bring himself to tell her *everything*, she would definitely want him dead.

Sunny desperately tried and failed to calm his breathing. His pulse was racing and the ceiling above him seemed to lower itself in on the bed. The teen stole a panicked glance over at Basil and saw that the blonde had begun to tremble slightly. Basil had definitely noticed Sunny struggling, and his composure had begun to crumble as well.

*Shitshitshit-*

Basil thought that Sunny was becoming scared of him again. He would definitely blame himself for Sunny's sudden panic. This was bad. Sunny needed to find some way to reassure him. Just say something.

*Say something. He just had to say something.*

***Anything.***

But Sunny didn't say anything. He just kept his mouth shut, as was so typical at this point. The boy almost laughed to himself as the tension in the air began to strangle him.

*Say something to Basil?* Say what? What exactly would Sunny say? Say he was sorry for abandoning him for four years? Say he was sorry for killing Mari and ruining his life?

Apologize for turning him into a perpetually frightened, socially isolated, cut-up and bruised ball of self-hatred that cried itself to sleep?

*Apologize for that?*

Sunny didn't fix relationships, he destroyed them. He surgically extracted love from the people around him and then tossed them aside like they were nothing. The idea of Sunny trying to help his friend relax was outright laughable.

Sunny stared emotionlessly at the floor beside him. He hoped that if he regained his lifeless composure that Basil would calm down again and the two of them could at least continue resting together in silence. They both clearly needed it.

There was no reason to sit here and continue to wonder what his friends would have done in this situation. If Sunny was anything like them, then him and Basil wouldn't even be here in the first place. The only reason to continue thinking like this was to engage in a narcissistic bout of self-loathing that would accomplish nothing. As always, Sunny would be better off if he just fucking shut himself up.

Sunny exhaled in misery and closed his eyes.

Basil continued trembling slightly by himself. Sunny could feel the tiny vibrations from his friend just barely creeping across the mattress.

…

*What would Mari do?*
**Stop.**

What was even the point of thinking this way? Mari was better at getting Basil to stay positive than anyone else. She was smart, kind, caring, and always knew exactly what to say to everyone. She had a way of practically reading their friend's minds, and everyone in the group relied on her to keep everything together. Mari was a perfectionist, but she might as well not have been. She was already as close to perfect as anyone could possibly get. And now she was dead.

Ever since the events in the hospital, Sunny had just been acting out some sort of twisted joke, pretending as if he was anything like his dead sister. Deluding himself into believing he was capable of being anything like their beloved friend which he had killed with his own hands. It was evil.

*Sunny wasn't like his sister. He wasn't like anything at all. He was useless.* ***Less*** *than useless.*

***He was sick***.

Why had Sunny even spoken to Basil in the hospital to begin with? To hurt him all over again? To torment him one last time for the road? *Sunny was disgusting.*

*He should have just jumped off the r-*

*"... Sunny?"*

# Fake

Sunny was suddenly shaken from his thoughts. Basil had finally starting speaking again. The boy turned his head to meet his friend's nervous gaze. Basil looked almost as if he was about to cry.

"I-If you're still s-scared of being around me, I c-can go sleep in one of the other d-display rooms, I don't m-mind-"

**"No!"** Sunny accidentally yelled at him. The blonde flinched and instantly shrunk backwards. Sunny felt horrible.

"N-No…" Sunny shamefully mumbled. "P-Please don't leave right now, Basil… *please*..." The black-haired boy squeezed his eyelids shut, terrified that if he opened them again that Basil would run away from him.

"Okay. I won't." Basil responded quickly and with a surprising confidence. Sunny reopened his eyelids. Basil tried to smile at him, but couldn't seem to manage it this time. The two of them simply stared at each other in misery. Sunny could feel Basil's gaze locked firmly on his missing eye.

They silently studied each other's pained expressions, both seemingly incapable of offering the other any comfort besides resting in the shared weight of their combined gloom. The voice in Sunny's head had fallen completely mute, the entire room drenched in somber silence. All that existed in this moment was Sunny looking at Basil, and Basil looking at him.

Everything felt intensely hopeless, but Sunny couldn't help but let a smile eventually slip out as he stared at his best friend. Basil smiled back.

"D-Do you want something to eat?" Basil quietly asked. Sunny shook his head.

"Y-You really should eat more, Sunny." Basil insisted. "You've injured yourself again a couple times since we got stuck here…"

"I'm not hungry." Sunny replied. Basil looked downcast.

"What about you? You're still hurt too, why don't **you** eat something?" Sunny deflected his friend's care back at him.

Basil's expression momentarily soured before his sad smile returned. He shook his head. "I uh… I don't think I could keep anything down right now, haha…" The blonde faked a laugh.

*"Because of the injury on your stomach?"* Sunny quietly inquired.

Basil's appeared to panic again slightly before his face quickly returned to neutral. "U-Um… *no.* Not because of that." Sunny's friend replied.

The bed turned quiet once more. Basil didn't explain himself any further. *Okay.* You could almost hear invisible crickets going off in the air.

Sunny sneezed. The air really was cold in here. Even just keeping his face above the blankets was starting to feel like an expedition into the arctic. This was looking pretty bad.

*"Bless you."* Basil responded.

"Thanks."

Sunny couldn't help but wonder for a moment if Basil might consider the possibility of the two of them sharing… *bodily warmth* right now. Even the thought of suggesting it made Sunny's face heat up. So that was a start.

…

It wouldn't be THAT weird if they… *cuddled* though, would it? It definitely wouldn't be the first time. Cuddling under Sunny's mountain of stuffed animals was a relatively frequent occurrence when they were both younger, alongside the occasional sleepover. Besides, if they touched each other right now it would just be for… *survival purposes.* A temporary, utilitarian act done out of mutual convenience. The building would probably heat back up a little after the clouds finally cleared and the sun came back out. Basil would understand all that, wouldn't he?

Sunny tilted his head slightly in an attempt to remove the invasive thoughts and stop them from spreading inside his skull. *It was different now.* The two of them weren't kids anymore. They were both nearly adults, and touching each other had somewhat different… implications.

*...but they **were** still best friends, weren't they?* Best friends wouldn't let each other freeze to death… and it's not like trying to keep your best friend safe from the cold was a weird thing to do, right?

He swallowed. Should Sunny ask if they're still best friends?

What if Basil said they weren't? What if Basil said he didn't even want to be friends with Sunny after he moved? That he was just being polite so the two of them could get closure? Sunny couldn't handle that. There's no way he could handle losing EVERYONE.

*Focus.*

This thought process was a waste of time. Whether or not him and Basil still considered each other to be best friends was not something to spend unnecessary energy fretting over. Especially not right now. Sunny was running in circles without moving an inch.

Besides, Basil had already said himself that he cared about Sunny. He said he cared a **lot**.

…

*FOCUS.*

But Basil probably didn't want to be touched by Sunny. Even thinking about this was something selfish. He needed to be more considerate of his friend's feelings. With how awkward things had become, asking if Basil wanted to cuddle with him right now was an act of insanity-

"Sunny?" Basil spoke again.

*"...Uh?"* Sunny awkwardly responded, tripping on his tongue.

"Are you okay? Y-You've been breathing kind of weird for a while now…"

Sunny nodded. "I'm fine." He said, his tone not coming across as particularly convincing.

Basil's brows furrowed slightly. "Is there something you want to get off your mind? You know you can talk to me, right? If y-you want to, I mean…" The blonde trailed off.

Sunny shook his head. "Nothing in particular…" He lied. "How about you?" Sunny once again deflected. "Is there anything you want to talk about since we're stuck here?"

Basil's nose scrunched slightly and his eyebrows moved again. The flower boy looked as if he was seriously considering bringing something up.

"I… *I don't know.*" Basil admitted. "It's just still really… hard, y'know? I'm pretty out of practice when it comes to talking with friends." He awkwardly faked a laugh.

Sunny's ears perked up a bit when Basil said *'with friends.'* "Yeah." The black-haired teen responded. "I know exactly what you mean."

Basil let out a very soft sigh through his nose, and Sunny followed in tandem. The two of them mutually stared up at the ceiling as if it would somehow provide conversational assistance. Seemingly having grown tired of thinking to himself, Basil stood up and wrapped a blanket around his shoulders. Sunny wondered how he even managed to withstand the cold.

"I wish this room wasn't so dreary and grey." Basil muttered. "I-It's already hard enough to stay positive right now."

Sunny gazed around at the display room's melancholic color scheme. In all honesty, it didn't really bother him. He was used to dark, depressing places like this. *Both real and imaginary.*

Basil quietly walked over to the coffee table and took a seat by the window, gazing out into the frozen world. Sunny used this opportunity to steal a few glances at Basil's face, inspecting the subtle lines and curves of the boy's expression. Basil looked as if he was trying to hold something in.

"Basil? Are you feeling okay?" Sunny asked from across the room.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just… thinking. It's kind of silly to be honest, especially given the situation we're in…" Basil mumbled. "It's just that for some reason, snow-"

*"-always makes you really sad."* Sunny finished his statement while looking down at the floor. "You hate cold weather." The boy plainly stated. Basil raised a brow at him.

"I-I'm surprised you remember that." The blonde claimed, his face flushing slightly.

Sunny kept staring at the floor. When he was younger, it was little, insignificant things like that which made Basil feel sad. Now there was so much more that haunted him. Even after the truth came out, Basil still carried an enormous weight on his shoulders. Sunny wished he knew what combination of words or actions he could use to lift some of that burden off of Basil, but he didn't have a clue. He felt as if everything he said just made Basil's life worse.

Basil gazed at Sunny's increasingly depressed expression. "Is the snow making you sad, too?" He joked. Sunny smirked, but the smile didn't make it to his eyes.

"Why do you think snow makes you feel that way?" Sunny inquired, curious.

"I'm… not sure." Basil admitted. "Maybe it's because the cold kills a lot of my plants?"

"Maybe because it makes the world look so… *empty.* Lonely, even." He continued. "When I look out at all that white, it just makes me feel like there's nowhere to go, nowhere to run, no way out…" Basil stopped himself.

"Haha, uh... sorry about that." Basil faked a laugh and awkwardly apologized. "I-I don't know why I started saying all that weird stuff…" he trailed off.

"Once we get back home and the weather goes back to normal you should let me help you garden again, like we used to." Sunny suggested, trying to brighten Basil's mood. He felt a pang of guilt as the words *'back home'* left his lips. That wasn't exactly right. Faraway wasn't going to BE his home anymore.

Basil didn't say anything back. For a moment, the air fell silent again. The blonde hesitated his response for just long enough that Sunny began to feel really nervous.

"…Yeah!" He suddenly agreed with enthusiasm. "We should definitely do that. I know a lot of cool tricks now that I can show you…" the boy trailed off, seemingly having gotten lost out the window again. Sunny considered speaking up a second time but Basil continued.

"We could go to the gardening center at Fix-it." The blonde suggested. "Grab you some decent gloves and then plant a… *bush* or something."

Sunny smiled. This was the first time since the events in the hospital that the two of them talked about *making plans* for something. Looking into the future to anything other than painful emptiness and regret.

"Didn't you always say when you were younger that you wanted to own your own gardening center?" Sunny inquired.

"Hm? Oh… yeah, maybe I did." Basil replied. "Or maybe I'd be the person who landscapes graveyards and keeps all the hedges trimmed and puts flowers on everyone's graves."

Sunny flinched when his friend suddenly started talking about graveyards, anticipating Basil was about to steer the conversation into something really serious, but the blonde just continued on.

“Or I could be like… one of those people who does flower arrangements for weddings and stuff. Or the photographer even!” Basil laughed. “Say cheese!” The blonde said, miming a camera at Sunny with his fingers. Sunny smirked.

“Or maybe I’d not even have a job. I’d become a self-sufficient farmer and live in the country somewhere. Growing my own food and taking photos of all my flowers…”

“I’ve always wanted to try my hand at beekeeping. Maybe my farm could have a beehive set up?” Basil pondered aloud. Sunny imagined Basil caring for an entire kingdom of tiny, buzzing insects. It wasn't hard.

He waited to see if Basil was going to say anything more, but the blonde seemed to have finally finished daydreaming, a thoughtful smile now plastered across his face. He sighed wistfully, turning his attention back out the frosted window. “Not that any of that stuff really matters anymore...”

Sunny’s smirk vanished. *Didn’t matter?* What was Basil talking about?

“What do you mean it doesn’t mat-“

“Hey!” Basil cut him off. “Sunny, quick come look at this! Get over here!”

Sunny scrambled to his feet, feeling a throb in his head as he quickly made his way over to the large windowpane with Basil. “What? What is it?” He asked, peering out into the snow.

Sunny’s eye widened as he observed in the distance a large, furry shape quietly trudging across the frozen ground. *A bear.*

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen one outside of a zoo before… I wonder how they do it.” Basil beamed with curiosity. “Make their way through the ice and snow like that. Like they aren’t even phased by it.” The bear did not stop to take note of its new indoor viewers, simply walking past the side of the building and towards the sea of trees in the distance.

“Shouldn’t it be going to sleep right now? Since its so cold?” Sunny wondered aloud.

Basil was quiet for a minute, as the two of them watched the bear continue along its lonely path in silence.

“I don’t know.” Basil responded. “I think maybe… *he’s done sleeping.*”

Sunny turned his head to glance at Basil. Basil wasn’t looking out the window anymore. Basil was looking right at him. Sunny swallowed and felt his face start to heat up a bit. Basil also swallowed and then looked away, seemingly having embarrassed himself in return. The two of them resumed watching as the bear finally disappeared from view. Basil spoke again.

“I’ve always wondered if a bear would be cute if it was colored black and yellow like a bumblebee.” Basil admitted. *“Is that dumb?”*

Sunny nodded. That **was** pretty dumb. Basil smiled and lightly prodded him in the arm.

“Do you remember that one time we were having a picnic and Kel tried to catch that wasp in his hands?” Sunny asked, smirking to himself.

“Oh yeah!” Basil confirmed. “I can’t remember… did he actually end up catching it? Did he get stung?”

“No. Mari, uh… she ended up tackling Kel before he had a chance to chase it back to the nest. She ended up getting her new dress covered in dirt and it ripped a little. Hero was *so* pissed.” Sunny summarized, feeling a bit strange speaking his sister’s name out loud. Basil seemed unfazed.

“Was he really?” The blonde asked.

“Yeah, he was super mad but Kel just seemed to think it was hilarious. I remember for like a week afterward he kept trying to get Mari to tackle him again. He said he was just *‘giving her the training she needed to reach her full potential.”*Sunny said, miming airquotes for Kel’s inspirational words.

The two of them laughed to themselves, looking back out the window at the fresh snow. No more bears. Basil turned back to look at Sunny once more.

“…So?” Basil asked. “Did you want to talk about what Kel told you in the hospital yet?”

“I uh-“ Sunny hesitated, feeling his hands twitch slightly. Basil locked eyes with him and offered a somber smile.

“It’s okay Sunny, I can go first. It’s nothing either of us should panic about, really-“

*“No.”* Sunny cut him off. “I’ll go first.”

Basil smiled again, his eyes now lowered.

Sunny ran through the event in his mind.

“He didn’t really seem upset at all he just seemed… confused. Kel was a lot quieter than I think I had ever seen him before. He said he didn’t know if he wanted to be friends again right now but that he also didn’t want to **not** be friends? He said he didn’t want to believe that the last few days we spent together were all for nothing. He said he wanted us sleeping in your house that night to have... meant something.” Sunny stopped, looking at Basil. The flower boy calmly nodded, still gazing down at the floor.

Sunny cleared his throat.

“I asked him about Hero and Aubrey and he uh, he said he’d… put in a good word for us? I guess? For what it was worth, anyway...” Sunny paused again, Basil remaining silent. “He

asked about how it happened. I guess he needed to hear it again? He… looked me dead in the eyes and asked me if it was really just a mistake. Maybe to like, test if I was being truthful. I told him it was. He accepted that right away. He didn't seem to hesitate about any of it at all."

"He said he needed some space right now, but he smiled at me when he left. He gave me his phone number, too." Sunny finished, a cold ache flowering within his chest.

"That's… *good*, isn't it?" Basil finally responded.

"…Yeah!" Sunny expressed with fake enthusiasm. It WAS good, wasn't it? Why did he feel so uneasy?

Sunny cleared his throat once more. "So what about you? What did Kel say when the two of you spoke?"

Basil stared up at the ceiling for a moment, seemingly lost in thought. "Honestly… mostly the same? *Sorry*..." The boy apologized.

"He didn't press me about Mari. I think Kel was going easy on me when we talked, because he knew I had just lost my grandma too and everything." Basil stated.

Sunny flinched. Basil hadn't mentioned his grandmother a single time since the two of them had been hospitalized. Sunny was not going to be the one to bring it up first, considering the two of them were half-dead at the time, and still reeling from the truth finally coming out. Basil stoically carried on speaking.

"He apologized to me, actually." The blonde continued. "Kel said he was sorry that he avoided talking to me for so long and that he let us all drift apart the way he did. I told him that wasn't his fault of course, but he didn't seem to budge."

"He said that the few moments he spent with you three was… the happiest he had been in a long time."

Sunny felt the room grow a few degrees colder, somehow.

Basil looked back at the floor. "*Isn't that strange?* I know Kel moved on, made other friends, had a life all to himself… I wonder why he even still cared… to still knock on your door after four years. Maybe since he knew you were moving he felt like he needed to see you one more time for closure or something?" The blonde stopped upon viewing the increasingly downcast look on his friend's face.

"Sorry, that was stupid." Basil said. Sunny shook his head, reassuring him. Basil set his head on his knees and hugged at them.

"Do you think we're all just, **tied** to each other now?" He asked. "It isn't as if I never had hundreds of opportunities to go out and make any other friends those four years, its just that whenever people spoke to me it felt… **fake**. Like I was some kind of actor, pretending as if I had a place among… *normal people,* I guess."

Sunny felt a stab of guilt pierce through his chest.

“I guess I WAS an actor. Lying was all I ever did. To grandma, to Polly…” Basil stopped himself. Sunny bit down on his tongue, bile trying to climb up his throat.

“Now that I’m finally talking to you after all this time… I’ve kind of started to feel… *real* again? Is that dumb?”

“No, I feel the same way.” Sunny responded, exhaling.

Sunny's friend studied his face for a moment, eyebrows knit in concern.

“If you ever feel like you’re stuck with me Sunny, I promise that you aren’t. You aren’t like me. I know you can make new friends wherever you end up going.” The blonde confidently declared.

“I don’t WANT new friends…” Sunny grumbled, rather annoyed at what Basil had said. **stuck** with him?

“Sorry.” Basil apologized. “Just f-forget I even said that, haha.” He requested, faking a laugh. The room returned to silence.

Sunny stared at the ground, lost in thought. He built up his courage for a moment before asking the question that was burning a hole in the back of his mind.

*“...Even if...”* he started.

“Even if they *don't* ever forgive us, we’ll still be friends… right?” Sunny nervously inquired, incapable of looking Basil in the face.

Basil froze as his eyes widened. “Of course, Sunny!” He replied. Basil frowned at him. “I can’t believe you even feel like you have to ask that.” The flower boy angrily stated, puffing out his cheeks.

“Uh- Sorry.” Sunny sheepishly apologized.

“We can stay friends for the rest of our lives, if that’s what you want.” Basil reassured him, smiling.

Sunny quietly exhaled and relaxed for a moment before a hint of uneasiness resurfaced as he inspected Basil’s expression. Basil’s typical forced smile almost seemed… **pained.** The blonde turned his face back towards the floor.

The conversation had turned a bit more serious, and that nudged Sunny's brain somewhat. There was a topic he felt like he should have brought up earlier, but the both of them had seemingly been ignoring it. Sunny hated being the first person to start a conversation, and he was obviously terrible at doing so. If Basil wouldn't bring something up, it had been Sunny's general policy to not bring it up either. Sunny wondered to himself if now was the time to acknowledge it. *The elephant in the room.*

Not that it was the only thing they had clearly been avoiding discussion about. This entire room was full of elephants.

Back when the two of them were still in the hospital, the nursing staff had kept talking about "freak weather" and "dangerous storms" but all Sunny remembered is that it had been raining a lot. Intense thunderstorms were one thing, but **snow** in Summer?

Was it even Summer anymore? *How long had they been in that truck?*

A chill ran down Sunny's spine as he stewed on the fact that he wasn't certain what **month** it was, let alone what day of the week. The doctors had mentioned something about Sunny's pubescent growth having been stunted by malnutrition and that he would likely be able to put on a few inches if he kept eating again...

Had he gotten taller? He didn't feel any taller. Maybe it hadn't been that long. Maybe it was just... *snowing in Summer.*

Maybe snow in Summer wasn't even weird here, wherever they were. Maybe Sunny should start worrying more about **where** they were rather than **when** they were.

But **why** they were was the worst were of all. *'Were' both screwed, Sunny thought to himself.*

He should ask Basil what he thought about the weather. Basil might remember more than Sunny did, and could reassure his troubled mind... *probably.*

*Sunny thought about Basil yelling at nothing in the storeroom. He thought about Basil's nervous behavior this morning. Sunny thought about the way Basil had reacted when the blonde had seen his missing eye for the first time.*

Maybe... *maybe he wouldn't bring this up.* Panicking wouldn't help either of them, and they had both clearly panicked enough, recently.

Sunny calmed himself down a little. It really couldn't have been that long since they were in the hospital anyway. The bruise on Basil's eye and the cuts on his face were still as visible as ever. A constant reminder of Sunny's selfish dysfunctions. The black-haired teen exhaled.

*"Hey… Sunny?"* Basil asked, his voice barely more than a whisper.

"Yes?"

"Do you want… a hug? Maybe?" The boy asked him, refusing to make eye contact. Sunny nodded. He wanted that more than anything. Basil slowly shuffled over to him.

The interlocking of their bodies was somewhat awkward, neither entirely sure of the proper angle or motion, the both of them having been out of practice for quite some time. However, once they finally embraced none of it seemed to matter.

Sunny could feel it flowing into his mind again, that wonderful smell he always had. The smell that took Sunny to warm fields of sunflowers baking in the summer rays. Took him to quiet laughs and card games, lazy afternoons and soft beds.

*...and maybe a clothes basket.* In all honesty, Basil probably needed to take a shower. Sunny did, too.

But Sunny only squeezed harder, feeling his body gently drowning in his friend's dull warmth. He wished this moment could just go on forever. For but a second, Sunny truly felt at ease.

When Basil finally started to pull away, Sunny almost felt the need to stop him, but he restrained that urge. Basil turned his head towards the disabled television, his cheeks now dusted pink. Sunny stared at the floor, incapable of keeping a small smile from spreading across his lips. Sunny's heart was now warm with the precious nostalgia of a childhood embrace shared in the garden with his best friend. Sunny basked in that warmth, hoping the feeling would never leave.

But hiding underneath all that familiar warmth, that resurfacing of old fondness, laid something else. Something that Sunny wasn't exactly sure he was capable of looking in the face. That other feeling was a bit *hungrier* than Sunny was used to. A bit more desperate.

*Maybe he shouldn't have let Basil pull away after all. Sunny really didn't want to stop hugging yet.*

The two of them quietly sat side-by-side for a moment. Sunny wanted to say something, but was worried of what kind of thoughts he might let escape if he opened his mouth right now.

*"Friends for the rest of our lives…"* Basil absentmindedly mumbled to himself. "The rest of our lives isn't going to be very long if it keeps getting colder in here…" he muttered, frowning slightly.

"M-Maybe we should light a fire? Maybe if someone sees the smoke in the parking lot they'll come and check it out?"

Sunny nodded. That was a good idea. The two of them had waited for someone to come find them for long enough, they really needed to do something before their situation deteriorated even further. *It was time to start taking things into their own hands.*

# Charades

Chapter Notes

I made a poll for you, reader. The results aren't going to effect the story moving forwards, it was just something I was curious about considering this fic's demographic. I snuck a pun in there.

https://strawpoll.com/polls/xVg7d38jKZr

*Thanks for reading and commenting, have a nice day.*

The two of them walked out into the lobby and gazed through the window at the frozen lot that only seemed to grow more and more desolate as time passed. The snow had finally stopped falling for the time being, but it had built up rather heavily on the ground. Even the jet black of the asphalt was now hidden under a small layer of powder and frost. Just looking out the window at all made Sunny feel colder than he was before.

They *really* needed to find themselves something to wear on their feet.

"Computers." Basil suddenly mumbled while staring absentmindedly out the window. *What? Computers?*

"*The laptop computers!* I tried to use them to call for help the night we got here but they had been locked-" Basil said while he scrambled back to the two computers sitting on the receptionist desk in the lobby. "Even if we can't contact anyone, we should at least be able to find out what day it is..." the blonde said as he quickly stepped behind the desk. Barely a moment passed before Sunny watched his face fall into a miserable frown. It didn't seem as if either of them had any battery left. If Basil had wanted to check the date, he should have done so on the night they arrived.

*"I'm such... idiot..."* Basil muttered quietly enough that his friend could barely hear him.

Sunny could have sworn Basil had just called himself a *fucking idiot* under his breath but he decided not to think too hard about it. *When had Basil started using language like that?*

Sunny considered saying something to try and reassure his friend, but he decided to leave Basil alone for now. It wasn't even a big enough mistake to care about. They had much bigger things to worry about that night than checking the time.

*Besides, maybe there was a marked calendar somewhere in here... or something of the like.*

After some mild deliberation (and stalling on Sunny's part) the two of them decided to return to the furniture supply room back down the staircase. If they were going to have any hope of starting a fire, the two of them would need something flammable enough to burn in the wet parking lot, as well as a light.

Basil tried to make some mild conversation on their way back through the hall. He talked about how Polly had taught him a "secret method" for cooking the perfect s'mores, but that it was a shame that they wouldn't be able to have any for their oncoming fire. "I haven't made a campfire in ages-" he continued.

Sunny smiled but felt the stabbing pain of guilt as he listened to the blonde talk. *Basil was nervous*. He was trying to lighten the mood before they got there, but neither of them were going to be able to avoid descending the stairway again. Sunny held his breath as those horrid steps slowly came into view.

Whereas one side of the staircase still lead to a dark bloodstain composed of the two boy's hemorrhaged fluids, the other side was now occupied by the dried brown remains of Basil's stinking vomit. What the two of them had done to this place of business was a janitorial atrocity. Sunny braced himself.

The two boys paused above the top of the stairway. Sunny immediately felt a wave of dizzying nausea, whether from the foul sickness of the pathway ahead of them or from the ceaseless weight of his guilt he could not tell.

*"I-I'm… I'm really sorry, Sunny."* Basil apologized, his tone buried under layers of suffering. The black-haired boy squeezed his hand.

"Are you ready?" Sunny softly inquired.

"Yeah."

The two of them descended in silence once again, this time attempting to delicately maneuver around Basil's vegan hotdog leftovers. The blonde retched slightly as they past.

Sunny and Basil finally reached the bottom once more. Sunny felt a bit better than he thought he would, but Basil looked as though he might empty his stomach all over again. Sunny's friend took a shaky seat on the floor. He put his face in his hands, rough breaths forcing their way in and out of his chest as he struggled to maintain some semblance of his earlier composure. He lifted his head slightly. Basil tried to say something to Sunny, but only managed to squeeze out a wordless whimper. A lone tear dripped out from between Basil's fingers.

Sunny felt a sudden, overwhelming swelling of rage in his chest but had no one to direct it to. Why was this happening to Basil? Why did he have to keep reliving this nightmare over and over? Why couldn't they just have some kind of reprieve for a single day?

Sunny rubbed his friend's back softly and grit his teeth. *Why did his friend keep getting tormented by something that wasn't his fault?*

After a minute or two spent in quiet suffering, Basil stood back up. The two of them moved back towards the supply room, Sunny taking the lead this time, gently pulling Basil ahead by his hand as the blonde had done to him previously.

Basil sniffed. “I-I’m sorry about being such a creep yesterday. I just got a little freaked out…”

“It's fine." Sunny forced out. "You don’t have to apologize so much, none of this is your fault."

“But it’s just that… *yeah.* Okay.” Basil conceded, quietly promising he would be fine.

After a brief trip, the two of them ended up in the storage room once more. Relocating themselves to the cluster of outdoor items, Basil pointed out a half-used bag of charcoal briquettes that had been left leaning against the wall unattended. Unfortunately for the two of them, there was no sign of a lighter anywhere.

“We could rub sticks together.” Sunny suggested, half joking. The flower boy sighed in disappointment and set the bag of charcoal on the floor.

The black haired teen scratched the back of his head and turned to face the end of the room where Basil had previously shouted in fear of a possible intruder. Well... another one, anyway. An intruder besides the two of **them**.

Basil rubbed his hands together and blew into them. Sunny and his friend walked slowly past the mismatched furniture items and towards the huge concrete ramp that descended deeper into the darkness. Yellow safety guidelines on the floor suggested that employees might use vehicles or machinery to relocate heavy furniture from down below. Upon eventually drawing close enough to look down the massive ramp itself, the two of them finally came to a frightening realization of how far downwards it actually went.

Instead of simply leading into a slightly lower storage room where one might store larger furniture items, the ramp continued for several dozen meters, ending in another concrete floor that was almost too far away to see particularly well.

*“What.”* Basil expressed in mild shock, a panicked smile creeping across his face.

“D-Do we really have to go down there?” Basil mumbled, his teeth chattering slightly. Sunny didn’t respond, not wanting to confirm whether or not moving down this enormous cargo ramp was actually necessary. The two of them stared down into the shadows for a moment, considering their options. Basil exhaled, and pointed his flashlight into the condensed cloud his breath had made in the cold air. Sunny and his friend glanced knowingly at each other. They both knew they had to go down there. If they couldn’t find a way to heat themselves soon then the two of them would eventually be incapacitated by the growing cold.

Sunny and Basil began their decent down the cargo ramp moving somewhat quickly, as if getting to the end sooner would conclude the terror earlier. The cold floor made Sunny’s feet feel numb but with a dull pain. Him and Basil crept silently through the shadows until they

finally reached the ground floor of the sub-level below them. The black-haired teen waved his flashlight into the newly-discovered space.

*Chills ran down his spine as Sunny stepped into the largest single room he had ever seen in his life.*

It appeared to be an enormous underground warehouse. A countless number of rather expensive-looking couches, beds, tables, chairs, and various other furniture items sprawled in rows down into the shadows. Sunny thought this place could fit half his street, but he couldn't quite make out all of it in the darkness. He had been inside storage spaces before, but nothing quite like this. There had been a full-scale operation going on down here.

There was a small army of forklifts lined up within a painted yellow square to the side of the ramp's end. Cross sections of large metal girders crawled beside the ceiling looming above the two of them.

"Wow. This place is… huge." Basil noted, swerving his head to the side in an attempt to make out the width of the space.

Sunny swallowed. *His flashlight suddenly felt even smaller than before.*

Luckily for the both of them, the air down here was actually slightly warmer than it had been back up the ramp. The fact that this room was underground might have provided it with a much-needed layer of insulation from the frozen world above. But it was still too cold to relax.

The two of them began drifting forward in curiosity, glancing at the countless armies of bedspreads and couches. It was like an entire other world down here.

They walked past fields of forlorn furniture, flashlights swerving back and forth at all the wood and steel oddities that now surrounded them. Sunny repressed the urge to start testing every mattress individually. It seemed almost as if you could sleep on a different bed every night for the rest of your life if you lived down here in this furniture dungeon. It was a never-ending labyrinth of dysania.

Sunny took note of the fact that each item had been tagged with some kind of barcode label and identification number. Some also had pricing details attached. Sunny flinched slightly as he read them. *That's a lot of zeros.*

But although most of the furniture items were rather disinteresting, a few of the surrounding objects were much stranger than others. There were couches that were bulbous and rounded, tables with excessive quantities of legs, absurdly-elongated wardrobes and a massive chair that looked as if it belonged in the lair of an evil supervillain (or possibly a space captain). It was as if many of these furniture items were designed to be a bit more 'art project' than most would consider functionally reasonable.

It was almost like someone had just dumped a bunch of unneeded film props down here amongst the less-notable furnishings. Under any other circumstance this kind of thing might have made for a really interesting tour, but seeing all these random items spread about in the

pitch blackness made Sunny uncomfortable. He felt his heartbeat bounce out of sync as he took wary glances around himself. It was all too surreal, too… *dreamlike.* This place filled him with a familiar sense of dread.

Sunny glanced over at his friend's face as the blonde nervously chewed the side of his finger, his flashlight beam darting back and forth as if Basil couldn't decide what he was supposed to focus on. Basil's fear might have put Sunny even further on edge, but the black-haired teen found his focus suddenly gripped by an absurd curiosity.

Amongst the strange items, there was one large, white, spherical object that especially stood out to Sunny, and he immediately gravitated towards its place in the shadows (much to Basil's dismay).

Sunny climbed into a covered bed that was shaped like some kind of egg, or pebble... or maybe a weird UFO. It had an oval-shaped sliding door on the inside that allowed the bed to become an entirely enclosed space. It was like a... bed pod. *An eggbed.* Sunny wordlessly stepped inside to try it out.

The black-haired boy turned back to stare at his friend with an expression of dramatic insistence.

"Basil. Become a yolk with me." He demanded.

*The blonde stared at him like he was an idiot.*

Basil pretended to sigh with exasperation, but Sunny knew he secretly wanted to get in on this. The boy scooted over a bit to make room for his friend. Basil forcibly withheld a nervous smile which silently squirmed on his face.

The two of them briefly laid side-by side within the bizarre egg-bed-thing. *Hehe. Laid in egg.*

Sunny closed his eye and listened to Basil shuffling around in their new bedding arrangement. "It **is** pretty cozy in here." Basil admitted, his position against Sunny now becoming somewhat uncomfortable. Sunny moved an arm slightly and accidentally rubbed up against Basil's hand. His friend poked him lightly in return. There was very little space for two people in here. Even as small as the two of them were, they did not exactly fit comfortably within the confines of this egg. Regardless, the two of them relaxed together in silence for a moment. A pair of tired little yolks. The brief respite almost took Sunny's mind away from the situation they were in.

"*Alright,* I t-think that's more than enough egg time. " Basil abruptly decided. The blonde boy stepped out first, Sunny trailing behind him. *Well, it was nice while it lasted.*

The two of them resumed moving forwards in the darkness, but it was becoming increasingly obvious that they weren't going to find fire starting equipment in an elaborate furniture warehouse. Those two things seemed to mix rather poorly. Still, neither of them were particularly keen on leaving, both having now been bound by the force of their own curiosity.

Sunny's offhand thought that some of these might be movie props seemed increasingly realistic, but that didn't make sense to him. Was that really what happened to leftover props in movies? Did they just get sold off or left to collect dust in bizarre places like this? They probably got sold to rich people. Fans or enthusiasts who also had money to burn on weird stuff like leggy tables and eggy beds.

Sunny scratched the back of his head and felt a mild ache. He tried to picture the last time he had even watched a movie. Sunny hadn't really had much time to be engaging with media those four years, he was always a bit too busy. *Too busy sleeping.*

After a few more minutes spent drifting about and gawking at the absurd collection of seemingly random objects, Sunny spotted something else that caught his eye. It was a cartoonishly-designed castle play area, the kind you might see children playing in at an indoor mall. Basil stared at the playful structure and blinked in quiet confusion.

The floor around the castle was covered in a soft green mat. It was the modern indoor equivalent of the wood chips one would often see layered outside in parks: *softened the impact of a fall, but without all the hard tree bits or hidden spiders.*

The castle itself was coated in that bizarre, fleshy plastic that was near-indestructible, its design intended to withstand the heartless, violent force of dozens excited children. Day in and day out, these objects would be abused by the drooling force of animalistic schoolkids. Truly a wonder of modern technology, Sunny considered. Stuff like this was the reason kids like Kel had managed to survive into their teenage years. Sunny spent a few seconds reminiscing about a few notable impacts in particular. *Kel was really lucky those had all been baby teeth.*

Sunny eyed a small slide curving down from the top of the castle wall. "Hey Basil, do you want to invade a castle with me?" He jokingly asked.

Basil half-smiled in the darkness. *"Maybe later, Sunny."* He denied.

Sunny was kind of glad Basil turned him down. Seeing a palace designed for kids sitting here unused in a pitch-black room triggered horrific flashbacks in the back of Sunny's head, half-forgotten memories of unfortunate events transpiring as a part of his mind opened countless doors in search of a missing friend. The boy swallowed.

*Still,* he wasn't going to pass up an opportunity like this. This was probably the last time he would ever be able to do such a thing.

*"Sunny…"* Basil halfheartedly complained as he watched his black-haired accomplice start to climb the side of the miniature castle wall. Sunny was going to claim this kingdom as his own. He stood at the top of the tiny battlement and waved down at Basil. The blonde tiredly glared at him.

"You've had **three** recent head injuries, please get down from there…" Basil worriedly insisted.

"Don't worry, it's all been childproofed." Sunny joked.

The castle invader sat on the top of the curved slide and awkwardly scooted himself onto the sloped surface. He swiftly slid back to the ground in a highly-disinteresting fashion. The round trip barely lasted two seconds.

Basil clapped jokingly as he approached Sunny before grabbing the boy's hand and leashing him once more, a light smile now present on his face. Sunny looked back at the castle wall one more time as the two of them walked away. He thought the wall would look more complete if it had a giant cat peering down from it.

They continued sauntering together deeper into the inky blackness. *Rows and rows of chairs to sit in, but no real reason for anyone to do so.*

"Don't you think that it's weird, Basil?" Sunny asked his friend.

Basil scratched his face. "Don't I think *what* is weird?" He confusedly replied.

"It's weird that… we're alone right now. In a crazy place like this." Sunny stated, his gaze still bouncing about the contents of the room. "What are the odds of the two of us seeing something like this?"

Basils expression still seemed deeply concerned but he nodded in agreement. "Yeah, it does all feel kind of crazy. I wonder what you have to do to afford stuff like this..." The blonde replied.

"Is it strange to say that… I'm glad I'm not alone in here right now?" Sunny absentmindedly inquired.

*Basil made a weird sound in response.*

Sunny turned to the blonde, startled. "Hey, are you okay?"

"Y-Yeah… its just… my stomach. Sorry." Basil apologized.

Sunny's brows furrowed. *He had gotten distracted.* This was no time to be playing around right now, his friend was struggling.

"At least it isn't quite as cold down here…" Basil mumbled, trying to find a bright side to their current situation. Sunny squeezed his hand in agreement.

The two of them continued creeping through the ocean of furniture, but Sunny's bright curiosity had notably dimmed. He was worried about Basil. Sunny couldn't keep wasting time. *'Not quite as cold as before'* was not good enough.

He wracked his brain, trying to come up with a way to turn this void of random objects into something actually usable, but all of it simply added together to become a giant hallway filled with pointless nonsense. The boy felt a growl of frustration start to build in his throat when his friend suddenly stopped walking.

*"Forklifts."* Basil spoke abruptly, startling Sunny.

"…Forklifts?" The boy repeated in confusion. *Had Basil always used to just say weird words at random?*

"There has to be gasoline somewhere for the forklifts. If we use it, all we need is a spark from something metallic and we can start a fire... r-right?" Basil theorized with his eyes shifting to the side, lost in thought.

That seemed like a fairly reasonable idea to Sunny. If worst came to pass, the two of them could probably steal the liquid straight from one of the vehicles itself. Sunny didn't really know how to do that, though. It was a bit difficult for him to picture. He imagined just tipping a forklift over and hoping gasoline came out.

"Should we turn back and go look at the forklifts, then?" Sunny suggested. Basil pointed his flashlight further into the darkness for a few lingering seconds before finally responding. "Yeah. Let's go." The blonde agreed. The two of them made their way back towards the ramped hall they had emerged from. Sunny waved goodbye to the eggpod bed as they passed. Basil elbowed him in the ribs.

Sunny was smirking to himself. Maybe things weren't the best right now, but being down here with Basil wasn't so bad. He took a moment to think about all the fun places he wanted to take Basil someday, if the blonde would allow him.

Despite the absurd circumstances, for but a brief moment, Sunny felt like a normal teenager. It was like him and Basil were just walking down the sidewalk together on a dark night, heading home after an exhausting time spent with their hyperactive friends. Sunny waved goodbye to Kel...

**Wait.**

Sunny turned his head in horror to the tan-skinned young boy who was standing atop a couch in the distance. Kel smiled at him and enthusiastically waved his hands in the air. It was nearly pitch-black down here, but Kel seemed almost as if he was dimly glowing from out of the shadows.

*Sunny immediately feels an intense wave of fear. What he thought he was seeing was not real.* He immediately knew that for a fact, because Kel was much older now than the one which stood before him. Much taller. Sunny was just hallucinating again.

Since his stay at the hospital, Sunny had almost completely stopped seeing illusory images of people from his life, or creatures from his dreams. An occasional flicker at times, but they always faded fast, and they were always obviously fake. Sunny hoped that the fact they were decreasing in frequency and realism mean that he was getting... better. *More stable.*

However, this particular hallucination was uncannily realistic. The boy made some kind of gesture that Sunny didn't quite understand. Kel was trying to tell him something. Sunny's

friend was mouthing words in his direction. It's almost as if he's doing charades.

Sunny had stopped walking alongside Basil, and is frozen in shock at the sudden appearance of phantom in the distance. The blonde stops next to him, and begins to panic slightly at Sunny's instantaneous change in behavior.

"S-Sunny? What is it? W-What do you see out there??"

Basil's friend did not know how to respond, his mind still completely fixated on his unsettling delusions. *What was Kel doing? Sunny didn't understand what any of that meant...*

The hyperactive young boy closed his eyes and opened his mouth wide, as if dramatically yelling in Sunny's direction. But there was no sound. Finally seeming to accept that he could not communicate, Kel's eyebrows lowered in somber acceptance. One lonesome, noble tear built in the corner of Kel's eye as he waved to his friend a final time. Sunny took a single step towards the couch Kel was perched on top of, and the hallucination swiftly faded away. Kel is gone now. It was as if nothing ever happened.

"What? ***Sunny, please!*** *What is it!?*" Basil continued panicking.

Sunny finally turned back to face Basil and apologized to him. He made up a semi-convincing lie about how his head was killing him and his lack of depth perception sometimes made it appear like certain objects in the distance were not what they appeared. He asked Basil what the object he was pointing towards was, and feigned mild surprise when Basil informed him that it was in fact a couch. Sunny didn't want Basil to think he was losing his grip on reality. Basil's eyebrows knit in concern but he nodded, seemingly coming to terms with what Sunny was telling him and calming down a bit. This was just an instance of his friend having to adjust to living life with one less pupil than average.

Sunny took a brief moment to feel a tinge of sadness at saying goodbye to Kel, even if it was just in his mind. Although he wasn't real, it still hurt to watch him fade away like that. *Sorry, Kel. Maybe next time Sunny wouldn't be so bad at charades.* The two finally resumed walking.

They arrived at the army of forklifts. With this many, whoever owned this place surely had to have set up a convenient way to refuel them somewhere down here. Surely enough, there was a door a few meters to the left of the forklifts that the two hadn’t noticed hiding in the shadows as they had not initially turned around to look back towards the ramp.

The two of them approached the door slowly. Sunny’s hand broke from Basil’s as he lifted it to twist open the knob. Another supply closet, this one filled with the sour odor of rubber and plastics. *Must be the smell of fresh forklifts.*

The two of them stepped inside and looked around at the various spare tires and mechanical tools that were hung on the walls and strewn across the ground. There had to be something flammable in here.

Sunny had only just started to turn his head towards the other side of the closeted space when Basil suddenly screamed loudly in fright.

# It Didn't Mean Anything

Chapter Notes

*I have to stress this: please do not ever start a fire using gasoline. Gasoline is designed as a fuel, not a firestarter.*

Thanks for reading.

Sunny jumped and fell over backwards, the boy having completely missed the fact that **another person** was also in the closet with them. He swung his flashlight towards the stranger in a panic, trying to shout but couldn't do so with all the air having been knocked out of his lungs.

Mouth agape in terror, he stared at the smooth sheen of the stranger's exposed skeleton-

*Skeleton?*

Upon closer inspection, it was decidedly *not* a person. It was just some kind of… plastic Halloween decoration, likely left behind from last-year's office party as an obnoxious employee prank. The person-shaped object before them was nothing more than a ridiculous-looking pirate skeleton, complete with swashbuckling garb and eyepatch. A stuffed green parrot quietly rested within its ribcage as if trapped there.

"**OH MY G-** oh. *Oh.* Haha…" Basil calmed down as he stared at the cartoonish smiling face that Sunny's flashlight had revealed.

"That's um… that's actually pretty creepy. I wish they hadn't left that in here." The flower boy complained, his breathing returning to normal.

Sunny wanted to poke fun at Basil right then but he honestly couldn't. That had really freaked him out, too. It was **Basil's** fault though. Why did he have to go and scream like that?

The boy stood back up and walked towards their new seafaring adversary as his pulse began to slowly relax. "Hey Basil, check this out-" Sunny insisted, setting his flashlight on the floor and stealing the skeleton's hat and eyepatch. He awkwardly equipped both and turned back to gauge the blonde's reaction to his comical new look.

Basil's face broke into an irrepressible smile. *"You look ridiculous, Sunny…"* the flower boy giggled, trying to hide his mouth with his spare hand.

“Here, we can split-“ the teenage pirate insisted, taking off the seafaring hat and plopping it down atop Basil’s fluffy head. Sunny’s friend frowned at him, but Sunny couldn’t care less. Basil made for a really adorable pirate.

“I’m keeping the eyepatch.” Sunny plainly stated.

“It’s too big for you… and who knows where that thing has been! It could be unsanitary…” Basil quietly complained from beneath the brim of his new helm.

*Sunny ignored him.* The boy had a cool eyepatch now, Basil was just jealous of all the plundering Sunny was going to be doing.

The black-haired pirate turned his head back to the other side of the room, taking note of a few more discarded Halloween decorations before coming across the distinctive shape of a yellow-nozzled canister. *Gasoline.* There were about a dozen fuel jugs standing patiently in the corner, silently awaiting their next job, each unaware of its life-changing significance in this moment.

Sunny grasped the handle of the heavy red can before him. The idea of using something like this to start a roaring flame made him feel strangely powerful. He was a true pirate now, stealing treasure and setting the world ablaze. Sunny picked up the gasoline and turned back to face his seafaring companion, their quest now halfway complete.

Basil let out another tired smile. “Now all we need is a spark and some wood…” Sunny smiled too. He guessed now they had to go back up that giant slope again. Sunny paused his train of thought when he noticed the somewhat distressed look creeping across Basil’s face.

*The blonde sat on the ground for a moment and clutched at his stomach, looking as if he had suddenly grown rater sick.* He noticed Sunny staring down at him and removed the hand from his shirt, running it across his shoulder instead.

“Sorry just, um… just give me a minute.” Basil requested. “I’m really tired.” Sunny’s friend claimed.

“Do you want something to drink?” Sunny suggested. “I could go back upstairs and bring something down if you aren’t feeling up to this right now.”

“I’m okay, I just-“ Basil stopped mid sentence, a mild look of disgust flashing in his eyes.

Basil suddenly spat on the cold floor. Sunny froze for a moment in surprise. “S-Sorry…” Basil mumbled ashamedly, trying to disappear into the brim of his newfound hat.

Sunny didn’t say anything, but he felt a pit of dread begin to form in his intestines. His friend was clearly trying to play it off, but Basil was not doing well at all. Sunny had been the one their medical attention was mostly directed to since they arrived on account of his… *difficulties* staying upright thus far, but Basil wasn’t okay either. Sunny began to worry that Basil had been hiding the true extent of his own sickness out of some twisted sense of self-refusal.

He tried to come up with something to say to Basil, but he wasn't sure what words of concern he could express that wouldn't be promptly deflected back at him. The harder he attempted to think, the more his own head throbbed in pain. *Fuck. Why could he never do anything?*

Basil suddenly stood back up and turned away from Sunny, viewing the various mechanical instruments hung on the walls of the repair closet. The blonde picked off a somewhat-rusty looking wrench with a coarse metallic texture and examined it under the beam of his flashlight.

"What are you doing?" Sunny inquired.

"I just um… need to see if this works..." Basil mumbled in response to his question. The blonde suddenly stopped examining the wrench and set his flashlight down on the worktable, propping it against a piece of cardboard so it wouldn't roll onto the floor. Once he was confident it was secure, Basil flicked the flashlight off. With only Sunny's dim beam remaining, everything suddenly looked a lot creepier.

"S-Sunny… turn off your flashlight for a minute, okay?" The blue-eyed pirate quietly requested. Sunny was a bit confused, but he did as Basil asked.

*Sunny flicked off his light, and his lungs immediately tightened.* Everything was pitch black, completely devoid of any light whatsoever. He couldn't see the hands in front of his own face.

*"S-Shit…"* Basil fearfully mumbled under his breath, seemingly having not properly prepared himself for exactly how dark it was going to become once the lights were off. Sunny's heart skipped a beat. He wasn't used to hearing Basil *swearing.*

"Sorry Sunny, this might be a little loud, I promise it'll only be a second…" Basil warned his friend.

Sunny nearly bit his tongue in surprise as a horrible scraping sound violently pierced through the darkness. He couldn't be sure, but he thought he saw something orange briefly light up the dark void over where Basil must have still been standing.

Basil's flashlight suddenly flicked back on. The blonde briefly stared at Sunny as his eyes readjusted, shining his flashlight towards Sunny's chest so he could read his friend's expression. Basil smiled at him weakly. Sunny noticed his friend slide something metal back into his pocket. *The knife.*

"I think this will be good enough." The blonde claimed, clearly attempting to maintain a positive demeanor. "We only need to shave off a tiny spark and we should be able to start a fire." Basil said, holding up the somewhat-gross looking wrench.

"Do we really have to go back outside?" Sunny grumbled, exhausted by the thought of trying to start a fire in the frozen wasteland. "Can't we just light the fire down here instead?" He suggested, smirking to himself.

“Sunny… *No.*” Basil rejected his proposition. Sunny sighed through his nose. *Maybe Kel would have encouraged him to start an indoor fire.*

“So... I guess that’s all then? We don’t need anything else from down here so let’s head back up?” Basil suggested, a gentle glimmer of hope trying to hold itself steady in his eyes. Sunny nodded. They have what they needed. Maybe now they could have some sort of reprieve from the cold for the first time since they showed up at this terrible place.

Basil turned back towards the door and began to make his way back out of the closet. The blonde removed his pirate hat and placed it on the workbench as he walked away.

**Oh no you don’t**. Sunny thought to himself, promptly picking the nautical helm back up and hurriedly catching up behind Basil. He slapped the hat back atop Basil’s head while he was turned away.

*“Wh-“* Basil responded in surprise, swerving his neck around to look back at Sunny. *“I have to keep wearing this thing?”*

“I mean you don’t **have** to, *but you look so cute in it.*” The black-haired pirate recommended.

Basil’s face turned red. He opened his mouth for a moment like he was about to say something in protest but couldn’t seem to find the words. Sunny smirked. The blonde huffed slightly, blowing a few stray hairs away from his face. Sunny repressed a growing grin. *Looks like the pirate hat had made it past customs.* Basil frowned.

Basil’s eyes then suddenly widened when he noticed Sunny dragging the gasoline can along behind them.

“Oh w-wait I forgot! Give me that! You shouldn’t be the one carrying anything around…” Basil complained.

Sunny’s brows furrowed. Basil didn’t seem like he was in any condition to be dragging heavy fluid cans around either.

“But it’s okay if **you** do it, huh?” Sunny retorted, refusing to let go of the gasoline as Basil tried to forcibly take control of the object.

“Sunny quit being ridiculous, you have barely been keeping your head off the floor recently….” Basil verbally prodded at him.

*He’s right, idiot.* A monochromatic voice in the back of Sunny’s brain chastised him. But Sunny wasn’t listening, he was going to play it up a little. **He** had found the gasoline after all.

*“Sunny, give me the-“* Basil awkwardly poked at his hand with the flashlight.

“No, it’s mine.” Sunny joked, rotating his shoulder to defend himself from Basil’s persistent hands.

Basil puffed out his cheeks slightly, glowering at him.

“Alright, FINE.” Sunny conceded. Basil’s demeanor brightened and he placed his hand on the handle once more. The blonde tugged but Sunny still didn’t let go.

“You can **help** me carry it.” Sunny smugly elaborated, raising his eyebrows slightly.

Basil scoffed in amusement and rolled his eyes. *“Okay, okay… if it gets us out of here…”* The flower boy forcibly choked back a giggle. Sunny felt a grin try to take control of his face.

*Basil was smiling.* A **real** smile. Sunny grinned as he glanced down at his feet. For a moment, the situation they were in didn’t even feel like a big deal anymore. A voice in his head mumbled something about Sunny not deserving to feel this way, but he didn’t pay it any attention. Right now it didn’t matter. He just wanted Basil to keep smiling like that. *Fuck worrying about all of this. Fuck this place.*

The two of them began their slow ascent back up the ramp, a flicker of positivity putting some energy in their steps. The pair’s movements synchronized slightly, both of them trying to avoid sloshing the can around too much.

Sunny and his friend emerged from the top of the hall and back into the initial storage room. They approached the charcoal bag that Basil had abandoned previously.

After a few moments spent in a very unproductive and comical argument, Sunny agreed to trade his gasoline can in favor of carrying the charcoal instead. The two of them continued moving back towards the building’s entrance, the sound of crinkling paper and sloshing liquid assaulting the previously-silent halls. Sunny focused all of his effort on just trying not to trip over. *If he fell again, Basil would probably end up strapping his legs to the bed next time.*

They reached **that** staircase again. Sunny was prepared to pause and let Basil have a moment to collect himself, but Basil kept moving. He walked right over their collective bloodstain without a word of acknowledgement. Basil stopped with his foot on the first step, waiting for Sunny to catch up momentarily. The two of them began their ascent. Sunny walked alongside his friend, huffing quietly as he pulled the charcoal up with them in his quiet struggle.

*Even disregarding all the head trauma and blood loss, Sunny was not exactly in the best physical condition.*

Basil had much less trouble. The two of them arrived at the display room hall and worked their way towards the lobby.

The two boys stared out the glass door at the frozen lot. Luckily, it hadn’t started snowing again. Sunny silently wondered if the gain in heat from a fire would really outweigh the pain of having to sit out there in this cold.

“T-Too bad we never found any shoes, huh? Haha…” Basil chuckled, clearly stalling. The blonde suddenly took the knife he had been carrying back out of his pocket.

“Alright, here we go…” The blonde announced, walking back through the automatic door. *Hopefully that would keep working,* Sunny thought to himself. It would really suck if the

door stopped opening while they were still outside. Sunny braced for the shock of the cold air, but it wasn't as bad as he was expecting. The majority of the temperature drop had already made its way inside the building, so the difference in heat between indoors and outdoors had become minimal.

Sunny hadn't noticed how numb his nerves had been growing to the cold already. The frozen lot really burned his feet though. Sunny tried to ignore it.

Sunny watched as Basil removed the blanket he had on his shoulders and cut off a tiny strip of loose fabric from the end of the stitching. He dangled the strip down the nozzle of the gasoline canister and tilted it until he was sure part of it had become soaked in the flammable liquid.

The blonde left it soaking inside the spout for a moment while he started walking back towards the abandoned truck they had crawled out of. "I'll b-be back in just a minute." Basil said, his teeth chattering.

Sunny unraveled the charcoal bag and looked inside. *Smelled weird.* He dumped a pile of black knobs onto the parking lot a few meters from the door.

The frozen boy watched as his friend climbed into the truck in the distance and hopped back out carrying an armful of the old blankets they had been sleeping under previously.

Sunny approached his friend and helped him carry some of the blankets as he appeared to be having difficulty maintaining his balance. Sunny's foot slipped on the icy asphalt but he managed to keep himself from falling on his ass.

Basil removed one of the most tattered blankets from his newfound collection and threw it over Sunny's makeshift charcoal field. Shivering under his pirate hat, Basil finally removed the fabric strip he had left in the gasoline and promptly threw the dripping cloth onto the center of the blanket.

*"D-Doing all this feels so weird…"* Basil mumbled, removing the rusty wrench from his pocket. *Weird?* Sunny was kind of proud of him. He smirked as he watched his friend quietly prepping for arson.

"Listen to me, Sunny." Basil suddenly spoke up. "We're only using gasoline right now because we couldn't find anything else. You shouldn't start a fire this way. Something like this is actually pretty d-dangerous and you can easily-"

Sunny bathed in the irony of listening to Basil warning him something was unsafe while in the act of doing that same thing. Annoying as this dialogue might have been, it was not all that surprising. Sunny's companion had a tendency to do this sometimes. Sunny was technically a year younger than most of his friends, so they often (rather obnoxiously) used to baby him a bit. *Basil especially.*

But that was likely just because Basil was considerably more anxious than his other friends. If he was honest with himself, Sunny was actually kind of amazed that his friend could still act this way after all these years.

*Sunny suppressed the urge to roll his remaining eye.* Why was Basil still treating him like he was still a kid? This wasn't a goddamn summer camp, they were trying to avoid freezing to death right now. Could he please hurry up?

Not that Sunny really minded the thought all that much. He loved listening to Basil talk regardless, and it was nice to see him speaking a bit more than had become typical recently. Getting lectured was a small price to pay if it meant Sunny could keep Basil's morale a little higher than it had been on their 'excursion' together thus far.

While rambling on like this, Basil's eyebrows had a tendency to knit in such a way that Sunny found particularly endearing for whatever reason. Sunny was watching those brows furrowing as they often would when his eyes drifted somewhat … lower.

*For reasons that he didn't really understand, Sunny couldn't stop staring at Basil's mouth.*

He figured if he was having difficulty paying attention that he'd be able to focus more if he watched Basil's mouth move as he spoke. It wasn't working at all. If anything, it was just making his mind feel even slower. Did Basil's mouth always look like that? Why did it seem different? Sunny was surprised his lips didn't become dry considering how cold the two of them had been the last few days…

Sunny thought about the way his heart had felt when Basil whispered directly into his ear, and he felt his heartbeat pick up in response. His vision began to shrink in focus.

*Basil's lips. The soft lips on Basil's face. Uh...*

"-with gasoline, even the fumes are flammable, so… Sunny are you even listening?"

Sunny nodded, cliff-faced. Basil squinted at him, trying to pick out whatever hint of emotion Sunny was concealing behind his unreasonably stoic expression.

Luckily, it was far too cold to invest much time in trying to determine whether Sunny had actually absorbed anything from Basil's impromptu camping lesson. The blonde's gaze returned to the task at hand. Basil took the rusty wrench and violently scraped against it using the knife he had stolen. The gardener's face scrunched up in response to the terrible sound.

Sunny assumed it would take a while for Basil to get a light (if it worked at all) but the flame burst to life in just three strokes as a tiny metallic spark fell directly onto the improvised firestarter. The wet gasoline strip was more than enough to instantly catch fire.

Sunny immediately threw another fabric strand over the minuscule flame. It burnt quickly. The fire began to burn down into the discarded blanket beneath.

*Sunny and Basil grinned at each other, ecstatic.*

Sunny channeled his inner Kel and raised his hand to tee Basil up for the most epic high-five in human history. Basil lifted his hand in the air to seemingly take Sunny up on that offer, but his enthusiasm largely faltered before the swing.

Basil's genuine grin faded back into his typical forced smile, and he delivered the high-five with much less enthusiasm than Sunny was expecting. It was more of an awkward hand-press than a high five.

Sunny frowned slightly. What was Basil restraining himself for? Wasn't *avoiding death* an accomplishment worth celebrating?

Admittedly, this fire did not exactly set the best mood by itself. Their crudely-improvised fire smelled kind of gross due to its unfortunate contents. Whether that stench was primarily from the gasoline or the old blanket (or both) Sunny could not tell. The two of them were in no situation to complain regardless.

While Basil tended to the growing flame, quietly folding the blanket around the fire so it would stay centralized in one place, Sunny stepped back inside and made his way down towards the rec-room, carefully avoiding bits of broken glass as he began to drag a couple of plastic chairs out of the doorway. Basil seemed annoyed that Sunny was physically exerting himself when he caught view of what the boy was doing, but there's no way Sunny's friend could deny that this would be better than sitting in the asphalt and snow.

The fire had already grown quite large from eating away at the old blanketing. Sunny propped his feet up on the edges of the fire after placing his seat opposite Basil. The warmth began to heat his toes and his face. *Ahhh.* This was nice. Sunny didn't think he had ever been this cold for this long before. He certainly hadn't been outside in the snow for... a long time.

*Setting up a bonfire in a public parking lot had a very rebellious feel to it.* Sunny hoped Aubrey and her pack of hooligans would be proud of them.

The black-haired teen looked at the pile of quick-burning blankets and then took note of the greedy pace of the flame as it billowed upwards. Sunny gazed at the snowy forest in the distance. "We're probably going to need actual **wood**, right?" He suggested. Basil scratched his face in thought.

Sunny looked over the massive expanse of snow between them and those trees before glancing down at his shoeless feet. *Come on.* There had to be a better alternative than that. Basil sighed.

Sunny sauntered over to one of the small bushes growing next to the building along the sidewalk. He started trying to break off bark and twigs from the branches but it wasn't working out. Despite the cold, this plant was somehow still a living, water-filled organism.

*"Hey!"* Basil complained. "Not the bush!"

Sunny smirked. Yeah, this wasn't working. "Be right back." He said, stepping back towards the business's glass doors. Sunny made his way down the vending machine hall, waving at Basil from the massive windows running along the sides of the building. Basil smiled with amusement at him, but that amusement appeared to die out quickly as he watched his friend stumble slightly on his feet. Sunny turned the corner and immediately walked into a doorframe. *Distance misjudged.* Hopefully Basil couldn't see that.

Sunny moved his way back into the offices and picked up a large wicker wastebasket that was slid under one of the desks. The pirate quickly ran his hand through the basket's contents. Just paper. All of it was discarded anyway, so Sunny was sure they wouldn't mind…

Sunny carried the entire basket back down the hallway and out the door, throwing it on top of the fire before Basil could complain.

Basil had a guilty smirk on his face, but he didn't voice any ethical concerns regardless. At this point the two of them had stolen property, burned property, trespassed, eaten stolen food, thrown up on the floor, destroyed a vending machine…

*What's one little garbage basket to a couple of pirates like them?*

"We should try to keep this burning as brightly and for as long as we can." Basil said, using the small knife to prod a loose blanket thread back into the fire.

Sunny nodded. "If we start a big enough flame, someone is bound to notice it, right?" He suggested, trying to look at the bright side. "We seem pretty far out, though…" The teen noted, glancing back at the hilly landscape surrounding them.

"Yeah… but the people who work in this building have to live **somewhere** around here... maybe there's a town nearby?" Basil said, staring off into the distance at the forested slope the truck must have driven up from. Sunny tried to gaze past the clearing they were in and through the trees that enclosed this place, but a cold fog hung in the air, and it conspired alongside the vegetation to obscure their view of the world around them. There *could* have been civilization close by, but if so, their view of it was buried under nature's uncaring hands.

*"Maybe we should just try to walk down the road, then?"* Sunny jokingly suggested.

*"Yeah."* Basil sarcastically agreed. "Maybe after we find thicker clothes, and shoes, and you stop falling on your face, and…"

"Ha ha." Sunny faked a laugh. Basil smiled at him. For a moment, everything felt a bit lighter again. Less serious. This was all just… *a weird camping trip.*

Sunny's momentary joy faded away quickly as he watched Basil awkwardly squirm a bit in his chair. Sunny had initially thought he was just trying to find a way to sit that would prevent his feet from dangling in the snow, but he noticed his friend's hand kept sliding back down to his stomach, to whatever injury Basil had been thus far unwilling to show him.

Basil was in pain, and trying to hide it. He thought he was concealing himself but he wasn't. Sunny could tell.

The eyepatched teen grit his teeth in frustration. Even after everything, the two of them were still lying to each other. Sunny wanted to call Basil out on his shit but maybe that wasn't fair. Sunny had definitely not been completely honest about the severity of the pain he was in. Maybe he should go back inside and get them both more of the liquid painkiller Basil had taken from the first aid box earlier.

The only thing that worried Sunny is that the pain relief might also make him tired. The pulsing in his skull was the only thing really keeping his eyelids open right now. He felt *exhausted.*

“Basil, do you want me to get you some of that medication you gave me? You look kind of… *uncomfortable.*” Sunny stated, trying to come across as non-confrontationally as possible.

“Oh, n-no thank you!” Basil waved his hand in dismissal. “I’ll go grab it myself if I feel like it’s necessary…” He trailed off.

“How about you, Sunny? How is your head feeling right now?” Basil inquired, his soft blue eyes piercing into Sunny’s brain.

“Could be better, but I don’t feel that bad.” Sunny lied. *Sunny needed to stop lying.* Basil nodded slowly and turned his gaze back down to the fire.

Sunny stared into the fire with him for a bit before lifting his head again as he looked back towards the truck in the distance. Sunny steeled his nerves. *Someone would notice them soon. They had to.*

A soft wind blew as the fire continued growing. Once again, him and Basil were alone together with nothing to do in particular, but Sunny was floundering to find anything to actually talk about. He was beginning to worry that all those years he spent alone in his room had permanently damaged his ability to speak like a normal human. This was beginning to feel ridiculous. Luckily for him, Basil spoke up first.

Basil had started staring at the truck, as if gazing at it further might unveil some lost memory hiding in the back of his head.

“I still think it could have been me.” Basil suddenly stated, eyes still locked on the vehicle. Confused, Sunny tilted his head. “I think I could have s-snapped somehow and b-brought us out here…” The other boy stuttered.

“That’s stupid.” Sunny bluntly replied. “Do you even know **how** to drive?”

“Is it really that strange to believe that I might have taken us here after what happened my last… *episode?*” Basil suggested, his eyes firmly glued to the ground.

“Let’s wait on the arrival of some actual evidence before we let you blame yourself.” Sunny stated, rolling his eye slightly. “You aren’t crazy, Basil.” The boy claimed.

Sunny’s partner in crime was unconvinced. Basil didn’t seem sure that either of them were really people who could make that kind of assertion. *Which might be true, but Sunny’s line of thought persisted.* The flower boy nervously chewed on the side of his thumb in thought.

“H-How do you know I’m not lying to you Sunny? Maybe I really did kidnap you and I’m just covering my tracks right now.” Basil suggested, inspecting the other boy’s expression.

*Sunny just stared at him, eyelid drooping in comical disinterest. He wasn’t having it.*

*"You're too trusting…"* Basil grumbled.

"We'll see." Sunny confidently asserted, a smug smirk creeping across his face. Basil's cheeks turned a few shades pinker.

"Alright then, what's your explanation?" Basil prodded, seemingly unsatisfied with Sunny's swift dismissal of his criminal involvement.

"I think the hospital just sent us on a vacation to the mountains." Basil rolled his eyes and scratched at his neck. Sunny was hoping that might get a smirk out of him, but it didn't even come close. Basil just looked tired and afraid.

Sunny felt bad. He was just trying to cheer Basil up, but he shouldn't have been making light of their situation.

*"Sorry."* Sunny apologized, staring into the fire.

"Y-You don't have to apologize…" Basil reassured him.

"At that time… after I asked you to lock the door before I left the room, and when I came back you didn't answer…"

Basil paused, seeming to struggle against himself. Sunny said nothing, waiting to see if Basil would continue.

"…I thought for a moment that I might've been dead. That the two of us might've died in the hospital and this was some kind of… eternal punishment." Basil said, eyes pinned to the ground in misery. "Isn't that stupid?"

The other boy scratched his head. "If we were really in hell, then I wouldn't be allowed to see you so much. If this is supposed to be a punishment then someone isn't doing a very good job..." Sunny said, absentmindedly staring into the fire until his breath hitched. He suddenly froze up when he realized what he had just said. *That almost sounded kind of flirty.*

He had only said what he did because that was what he honestly felt, but maybe he could have phrased it a little differently. Sunny was afraid to look at Basil's face. Maybe he shouldn't. Maybe he should just play that off like it wasn't anything noteworthy, by just… *ignoring it.* He'll just keep staring at the fire.

The flames lazily crackled before his eyes. Sunny wouldn't look at Basil. It wasn't anything to be weird about, he was just speaking off the cuff. Besides, it's not like he was trying to hit on Basil or anything.

...

**Was he?**

The other boy still hadn't responded. *He should have said something by now. Why wasn't Basil saying anything? Don't look.*

Sunny tilted his head and looked across the fire at Basil. His face was bright red. Sunny quickly looked back into the dancing flames.

*Basil's face was red?* What did that mean? *Probably nothing.* Basil was embarrassed by all kinds of things. He was probably just feeling awkward because of how Sunny kept making an ass of himself.

Sunny noted that Basil hadn't removed the hat once since Sunny mentioned how cute it made him, but that didn't mean anything, right?

*It didn't, right?*

# A Burning Pain

Chapter Summary

Thank you for participating in my silly poll. I was surprised by how handily Kel took it, but maybe I shouldn't have been.

*Just so you aren't caught off guard:*

Most of the chapter after this one is **not** from Basil or Sunny's perspective. Chapters from the perspectives of other characters become increasingly relevant for the story moving forward, but the majority of the text still stays centered on the two of them. Thanks for reading, have a nice day.

Basil glanced at the boy opposite him and tried to ignore the burning sensation in his intestines. He swiftly eyed up his accomplice but obtained no useful info from such a quick peek.

Despite their current situation, Sunny looked surprisingly… *okay.* As okay as someone could look wearing a ridiculous costume eyepatch and a bandage slapped on their forehead, anyway. The color had at least partially returned to his face. Maybe the warmth of the fire was helping him a bit.

Basil hoped the smoldering heat of the fire would hide the burning in his own cheeks. Sunny was being ridiculous again. Trying to tease him because they were alone together. Pulling that stupid dead face he always made. *Why did he have to say stuff like that?*

When Sunny first came back after four years, he had looked like a walking corpse. Not expressive, not reactive, barely even alive at all. It had felt horrible to see Sunny in such a lifeless condition, but that fear still couldn't undo how much Basil wanted his friend to have finally come back for him. Sunny **did** come back. He finally arrived to put Basil's life back in motion again. Basil wasn't sure it would ever happen, but for the first time in a long time, he had begun to enjoy being alive.

*If only a little.*

Sunny talked much more now, but it was clear how often he struggled. The boy would grow pale, his expression strained as if desperate to speak but incapable of finding the words. Sunny was likely still censoring himself around Basil because of how unstable he knew his friend was. The blonde silently cursed himself for the way he reacted when he saw Sunny's

lost eye. **He** was the one who had done that, and he couldn't even stand and look at the results of his own actions.

Basil wanted to insist to Sunny that it was okay to be scared of him, okay to *resent* him, but the flower boy knew his companion would never accept that if it was simply stated out loud. Sunny needed to come to that conclusion himself. As much as the other boy might have benefitted from a bit of social interaction after having been shut away for four years, Basil was not a person Sunny should have been wasting his time around.

But Basil was all too sure that the fondness Sunny expressed towards him was temporary. After what a horribly lonely life Sunny must have been living, even a person who had tried to kill him could probably still look like a friend from the right angle. Basil tried to always keep that thought in perspective.

At first, when they were staying in the hospital together, Basil had believed that Sunny hated him but was simply hiding it for the blonde's sake. Holding in his feelings so that the two of them each had someone left to lean on. *They were both so… fragile, then. They still were.*

Now, believing that Sunny was lying felt substantially more difficult. To Basil's disbelief, Sunny kept insisting he didn't hate him. He would actually speak those words out loud.

*He said them with such **conviction**.*

But that was impossible. Basil knew it, which is why he also knew he couldn't keep letting himself get caught up in the illusion of their steadily-healing relationship. *Sunny did hate Basil.* The boy just needed time to realize it. It was only because Sunny had been through so much recent trauma and emptiness that he had started to think Basil was even remotely redeemable.

Basil had thought for a while that acting normal around Sunny was the best way to help him out of his emotional shell, but the gardener became worried that he might have started being a bit *too* normal. Basil almost started to let himself enjoy what he was doing... as if everything was all about him. Basil was just selfish like that.

*And so, Basil felt he needed to put some distance between the two of them, for Sunny's own good.*

But when he tried to push Sunny away he felt truly awful. He could barely manage it for a second, even with his greatest efforts. Sunny had cried that morning. Seeing Basil trying to be someone he wasn't had frightened the other boy horribly.

That made sense. Basil was the person who ruined his entire life. It was a small miracle that he could stay composed around a creature like Basil at all. This temporary veil of normalcy that had formed around them wasn't something of insignificance, it was the only thing holding them together.

But Basil didn't want Sunny to become dependent on him the way he had become on Sunny. The blonde knew that he was too far gone now… *but there was still plenty of lingering hope for his best friend.*

Right now, they were alone with no one to turn to except each other. Basil needed to stop making stupid mistakes.

And so, he fell back in line once again. Basil started acting **normal**. Smiling like he was normal, laughing like he was normal, running through normal conversations about normal things…

*What was all that stuff Sunny had said earlier about them… gardening together?* That was obviously never going to happen. Sunny was moving away and would never come back for him again.

*Right?*

Why did Basil even play along with Sunny in the first place? Just to torture himself? Basil was getting too excited.

He shouldn't have hugged Sunny. That was a mistake. An act of pure selfishness. From now on, he needed to finally leash himself.

*But it was so cold… and Sunny was so warm…*

Then Sunny had begun to act as if things really **were** back to normal. Messing around in the warehouse, fighting over the gasoline can…

Basil needed to start putting a bit more distance between the two of them again. But he needed to do so in a more subtle way this time. Sunny would see what kind of person Basil really was if the other boy had stopped sitting right up in his face.

*Sunny wasn't making it easy, though.*

*Why did Basil's friend have to **STARE** at him like that!* He had to know at this point that Basil hated being stared at…

Sometimes Sunny would just zone out and his eyes would get stuck on him. When those eyes got stuck, Basil felt as if he had become stuck in return. He couldn't take any more of this… Basil was rapidly losing the little sanity he had left. It was far worse now than it had ever been before. Being stared at with those two black eyes was anxiety-inducing, but being stared at with **one** eye made Basil wish he was dead. Every time he looked at his friend's face he felt like the guilt was going to claw out his insides and strangle him to death.

*But despite all the anxiety and absurdity which lingered in the air, there was one silver lining which Basil had noticed earlier that day. One shining thread that Basil had managed to wrap his fingers around. Something that had vibrantly stood out to him, distinct from all of Sunny's previous behaviors.*

**Mari.** Back in the bedroom, Sunny had mentioned Mari. The other boy had spoken about her by name.

He was starting to open up more… starting to *unwind*. Revealing the truth to their friends had clearly cracked his shell, and now Basil could occasionally catch a glance of Sunny starting

to leak out. Basil could help him break through that shell. He'd do anything he had to do to accomplish that. Everything would play out the way it should... and then Sunny wouldn't need him anymore.

Basil felt somewhat of a sob build in the back of his throat and wiped his face on his sleeve. *What was he crying for?*

*What he was doing was good… wasn't it? This was just the way it needed to be.*

...

*Sunny had saved Basil. Basil would save him back.*

Basil glanced at Sunny. The other boy was looking into the fire. *Sunny couldn't notice Basil getting upset like this.* The blonde lowered the brim of his new hat so it would be harder to see his eyes.

The fire had begun to finish burning through the first blanket, and Sunny's wicker basket had quickly fallen apart. The orange lumps of charcoal that Sunny had left on the ground were still glowing away, having reached considerable temperature from the previously-raging fire above. Basil wadded up another one of the truck's old blankets and placed it on top of the flames. Sunny quietly cheered in response.

It felt really strange to Basil that they had a fire which didn't have any constraints around it at all. There was no pit to put these materials in, just a bunch of random items burning on wet asphalt. It smelled really gross. Maybe they should have picked up some stones first and made a proper firepit…

Regardless, they needed to be able to prolong the fire with something more serious.

Basil considered going inside and burning some of the wooden display furniture, but all of that stuff was likely chemically-treated, and this fire was their only source of heat right now. He didn't want to sour it and force them both back inside from the smell. Breathing that in could probably be really dangerous. Basil felt sick enough as it was.

Besides, the blonde didn't want to go to prison. They had already wrecked this place… And some of that furniture had been REALLY expensive.

"Sunny, I'm going to go see if I can find a log to throw on the fire… or something that wont burn so quick. *Stay here, okay?*"

"What? But you don't even have shoes…" Sunny protested. "You'll freeze your feet off going over to those trees."

"I'll be okay!" Basil responded, trying to sound reassuring. "I'll just run over to the trees really quick and then I can prop my feet over the fire as soon as I come back."

"But-" Sunny started again in mild protest but Basil stood up and started moving away. He wanted to leave quickly before Sunny could find a way to force him out of it.

*"Hey!"* The gardener thought he heard Sunny complain behind him but Basil just kept moving regardless. Gotta do what you gotta do.

His feet already growing numb, Basil tried to run for a second but then remembered the giant gash in his stomach. He couldn't risk such a serious cut opening up again. And so his brief dash turned into a speedy walk, which in turn fell into an awkward hobble. *It was horribly cold. His legs hurt.* Basil felt like he was going to vomit again. Sunny was right. This was a terrible idea.

But he couldn't just turn around now. That would just make Sunny even more worried. He'd just trudge onwards and hope his feet wouldn't fall off later that day.

Basil was about halfway to the trees before his feet stopped feeling much of anything. The lack of pain made it easier to walk, but the frozen condition of his feet was definitely nothing to celebrate.

The blonde trudged around the trees and brush briefly before deciding on a bark-encrusted victim.

He grabbed a decent-sized full branch from the ground and started tugging it along behind him, not wanting to spend more time than necessary trying to poke around and acquire a perfect chunk of wood that probably didn't exist. He'd just immediately return with this, and then get his feet out of the snow. The branch was pretty heavy, but the layer of frost on the ground made it a bit easier to drag towards the lot than it would have been on simple grass and dirt.

Basil could have chosen a smaller stick, but he felt relatively confident he could drag the whole thing back. He wanted to make sure this little trip meant something. The longer this chunk of nature took to burn, the fewer times he would have to do this again.

Taking quick steps, Basil was finally beginning to grow close enough to start to see the details of Sunny's face peering into the fire... *except Sunny wasn't there any more.*

Basil spent about a half-second in paranoid confusion before he promptly tripped and fell face-first in the snow. The white powder broke his fall, but he still ended up considerably colder as a result.

The striking pain from ice and snow suddenly rubbing against the giant cut under his shirt almost made Basil scream. He instantaneously stood back up and pulled on his clothes slightly to knock any lingering snow off of himself. The only thing that would be worse than this cold was being cold **and** wet. The blonde scratched a clump of ice off of his eyebrow and looked back into the distance, trying to discern where his friend had vanished to while the cuts on his face continued stinging.

Basil had been wrong before. **Sunny was still there.**The flower boy watched as his friend slowly adjusted in his seat, seemingly trying to find the best distance to maximize heat without toasting himself.

Sunny was fine. Basil was just being paranoid again. The blonde should have tried to fall back asleep earlier after he had been shaken awake by his horrible nightmares.

Basil grit his teeth and held his hand over his stomach for a brief moment. It hurt a *lot*. This burning sensation would have likely scared Basil more but he was running on a rush of adrenaline. His feet and legs were beginning to feel extremely strange. *He needed to get back quickly, this was not worth it.* He picked up the slightly-wrinkled Halloween decoration that had fallen off his head and pulled it back down over his hair. Surprisingly, the hat had in fact maintained a little heat, so it was actually good for something.

Basil walked up next to the lot and back towards Sunny, trying to straighten his back and look as casual as possible. Look like any other type of person than the kind who had just fallen on their face and gotten snow in their hair. Sunny finally noticed him and started running over in his direction.

Basil almost shouted at him for running but the gardener was too out of breath to manage it. *Sunny shouldn't be running on frozen asphalt. Sunny shouldn't be running, period.*

His friend had seemingly noticed Basil's struggle and promptly stepped behind him before picking up part of the branch, helping him carry it past the truck and towards their illegal public bonfire. Once they had finally made it to their crackling destination, Basil took a shaky seat back in his chair and sat his feet near the embers, hoping he didn't just destroy the nerves in his soles.

"Couldn't have picked something smaller?" Sunny asked, seemingly half-joking. Sunny seemed kind of concerned. Basil gave him what he hoped came across as a reassuring smile, but knew he probably just looked like an idiot. "This will be good enough for the time being, right?" The blonde replied.

The other boy started snapping off segments of the branch and tossing them onto the messy flame. Basil wanted to help, but he was still feeling fairly out of breath, and Sunny would have likely complained about it anyway. Sunny continued breaking off bits of branch and bark until he was seemingly satisfied that the fire had more than enough to work with. The other boy returned to his own seat, and went back to focusing on maintaining some semblance of body heat.

*Things seemed like they were looking up, but that was before a nagging dread had started to eat at Basil.*

Sunny was acting kind of **strange**. He looked pale again, even more so than he had been before. He was fidgeting, which was fairly unusual for him. The look on his face seemed somewhat unsure, almost... *afraid.*

But he didn't speak up at all. Whatever was agitating Sunny, he wasn't sharing it. Basil tried to steady his breathing as his mind began to crawl with potential justifications for why Sunny might have been wearing an expression like that.

*Basil glanced at the ground near his chair, trying to make the motion not entirely obvious just in case Sunny glanced over. The knife Basil had used to start the fire was gone. Vanished into*

*thin air. Only one person could have taken it.*

Basil felt like he was going to cry. **He knew it.** Sunny **was** afraid of him. This is what he had always known would happen, but it still burned inside him terribly. That's what he deserved for obsessing over such ridiculous hopes.

*Shut up. Stop crying.* What else had you expected? That you could partially blind someone and he would just shrug it off because you used to be friends when you were kids? *You're disgusting.*

But Basil couldn't stop himself. He could feel water trying to build up in his eyes. Basil fought the feeling back. *Why couldn't he ever just do what he was supposed to?*

"Oh! R-Right..." Sunny suddenly spoke up from across the fire. He stood and wobbled over to Basil, removing a small, wood-handled object from his pocket.

"Here's your knife. I just needed to borrow it for a minute to poke some stuff into the fire around while you were gone. *I hope you don't mind…*"

"Uh?" Basil very intelligently responded in surprise. "Oh! *T-Thanks, Sunny…*" he mumbled, feeling a queasy mix of guilty relief and aching sadness.

The blonde suddenly felt very awkward and like he needed to apologize, but apologizing for the thoughts he had bouncing around in his own head was just ridiculous. Besides, Sunny wasn't supposed to keep acting so friendly. *Distance.*

Sunny returned to his previous seat and wrapped his blanket tighter around his shoulders. After a few more moments spent stewing in his shame, Basil stole a few glances over at Sunny's face. The other boy stared neutrally into the fire, but his eyelid was still held a bit wider than it should have been. *Sunny was still worrying about something. It wasn't the knife.*

Basil felt like he should ask, but he would probably just make it worse. Even if Sunny wasn't afraid of him, there was no way he trusted Basil. If he did, why would he continue keeping quiet about whatever was unsettling him?

The two of them sat together in relative silence, the pair taking turns snapping off smaller fragments of the branch and tossing them into the flames alongside the occasional blanket fiber.

Every few minutes, Basil would glance down at his feet or shuffle them around again. As the fire awakened his frozen nerves, his toes had begun to burn with a consistent pain. Basil accidentally let out a quiet whimper as he wriggled around, sucking air in through his teeth. He hoped Sunny couldn't hear him over the sound of the fire.

Basil looked up into the sky and noticed a tiny snowflake floating down from above. The snowfall was starting to return. It wasn't as if a little snow could stop their considerable fire from burning, but it might have been a bad sign that the heavier snowfall was starting to come back.

Eventually, they started to run low on blankets, and Sunny pulled the last of the giant branch into the fire since they couldn't cut it or break it down into smaller pieces. The two of them had been out here for a long while now, but there was still no sign of anyone driving up to the building. Darker clouds seemed to be piling up in the distance.

Basil watched as his one-eyed criminal associate started picking up small, pocket-sized stones that were placed around the bushes on the side of the building and lined them up in zigzagged rows near or in the fire.

"What are you doing, Sunny?" Basil inquired, confusion audible in his voice.

"Heating up rocks..." Sunny mumbled. "Stuff like stones and metals hold on to their heat better than other objects, so if we need to go back inside we can bring these back to the display room and heat our blankets without setting the building on fire."

Basil scratched at the fluffy hair on the back of his head. *That was actually very smart of him.* Basil had been a bit worried that spending four years entirely isolated in his house had stunted his education, but Sunny still seemed as quietly resourceful as he was when they were younger. Although sometimes that resourcefulness was just an excuse to be lazy…

"Where'd you learn to do that?" Basil inquired.

"Captain Spaceboy." Sunny replied. "That special-edition story where his ship gets trapped on an ice planet." Basil smirked. *Figures.*

"Maybe we should make a bigger fire?" Sunny suggested. "Something that makes more smoke would become more noticeable. I could go get the wood this time..." The boy offered.

Sunny's eyes drifted downwards to Basil's feet for a moment before bouncing back again. Basil's friend suddenly stood up.

"I t-think that's a really, **really** bad idea-"

*"I've been fine walking around and doing all these different things today, I can drag a chunk of wood, Basil-"* Sunny protested, attempting to cut him off.

"S-Sunny, please don't try to walk all the way out there. Can't you stay here? *For me?*"

Sunny's face fell in frustration but he stopped arguing. The other boy didn't say anything else, he just calmly took a seat back in his chair.

"N-No more branches or baskets… we'll figure out a better alternative." Basil said, forcing a smile.

"…We could burn one of the mattresses." Sunny suggested.

*Mattresses?* Basil thought. Right… the mattresses in the back of the truck. That would definitely make a serious flame, (to put it lightly) but it seemed kind of dangerous, and would they even be able to stand whatever smell it made? Was it safe to inhale **burning mattress** fumes?

*"Let's hold off on that for now, okay?"* Basil suggested, smiling nervously.

The two of them continued staying warm for a while, but eventually their bad luck began to escalate.

The wind kept picking up. Soon enough, the flames of the fire were having difficulty even staying upright. Basil kept having to move his chair as the sparks and embers kept flying all over the place. This was exactly why fires were supposed to stay in contained spaces like pits and barrels.

Basil yelped as another sudden turn of the wind blew a flaming blanket scrap in his direction.

**The wind was freezing cold.** At this point, even if the two of them were hugging the coals they'd still be shedding the heat off their backs. They couldn't keep staying out here any longer.

Basil grit his teeth. *Why? Why had nobody come for them?* Was it really so hard to wonder about this giant pillar of smoke? Was this stupid building really just in the middle of fucking nowhere?

Basil picked up Sunny's *now-very-hot* rocks and wrapped them in the last of the spare blankets. He turned to look at his friend.

"Sunny. Help me drag out one of the mattresses?" He asked.

*Sunny's lips broke into a huge smirk.* His smile then was almost kind of creepy. Basil shouldn't be encouraging this, but they were running out of options. Hopefully this didn't awaken anything dangerous in Basil's already somewhat-strange companion.

After a quiet struggle, Sunny and Basil managed to shove the edge of the mattress into the burning coals. They stepped away and moved their chairs back as the wind continued picking up.

The mattress slowly started to catch fire before the fabric shell really began to burst into flame. The fire had now risen to tower over Sunny and Basil's heads. Burning something this large with this much wind was ridiculously dangerous, but neither of them were in any position to care. They needed to catch someone's attention. This nightmare had gone on for far too long already.

*But nobody came.* Sunny and Basil retreated back into the building to watch the raging fire and wind turn the mattress to ash without being assaulted by the horrible smells and hostile embers, but nothing seemed to come from their efforts. The flame began to die down again, as the snow started coming down in droves.

The two of them then briefly stepped back outside to grab the two chairs Sunny had brought out lest they blow away with the wind. Basil had brought his own chair back inside, but when he turned around, *Sunny was no longer there. He was still out in the storm.*

Startled, Basil stepped back out the sliding door. Sunny had walked off the edge of the lot into the snowy fields surrounding the building.

Sunny wasn't reacting to the world around him. He was just staring off into the distance, unresponsive. The wind was tearing viciously at Sunny's hair, but he was as still as a statue.

"**Sunny what are you doing we need to go back inside!**" Basil screamed over the howling of the wind. Sunny did **not** respond.

Basil panicked. *Something was seriously wrong. He began to quickly run up behind his friend.*

"**We have to go! Y-You'll freeze out here!**" Basil exclaimed, setting his hand on Sunny's shoulder to try and shake him out of it.

Sunny practically flew forwards in surprise, violently turning his body to look back at Basil. When the blonde saw the look on his friend's face, he felt like his heart had just stopped.

*Sunny looked horrified.*

The black-haired boy's shoulders started shaking. Basil needed to ask him what was wrong but he couldn't, his own body having been frozen in place by shock. The two of them stared at each other, Sunny's mouth hanging wide open. The wind tore at their hair, the rushing sound of frigid cold blasting straight into Basil's ears.

*"Basil it was in… in with-* ***didn't!****"* Sunny tried to speak but his words made no sense. His iris shook rapidly. Basil's friend kept trying to form a sentence but he could barely seem to breathe. *"T-Two!"*

"**What?** S-Sunny calm down!" Basil tried to reach towards him but Sunny took a step backwards, shaking his head as if he desperately needed to express something. Basil's friend was uncontrollably panicking.

Sunny tried to talk again but he just kept making choked sounds instead of words. He gasped for air.

*"B…sl!"*

The boy's good eye finally dulled its movement, and his eyelid drooped. Basil's friend fell to his knees and passed out in the snow. Luckily his body fell down slowly, and the snow had cushioned the impact between his head and the ground.

***"Sunny!"***

# Two People Walking

*He had crept into the woods past his friend's old hangout, steadily continuing to make his way deeper into the forest. He didn't want anyone in Faraway to hear him.*

Hero made his way into a small clearing where a rocky outcropping stood towering over him. It was much darker outside than it should have been, the thick storm clouds overhead nearly decimating any hope of receiving the sun's rays.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet, opening it to reveal an item that had been placed inside, the top poking out from beneath the leather. *A polaroid.*

*Mari.* It was a picture of Mari. She was sitting atop her piano bench, awkwardly blushing with embarrassment in the way she would over the most insignificant mistakes. Someone so painfully beautiful, but herself often unaware of it.

Hero had found this image sitting on the ground by the docks the morning after it happened. The morning after two local teenage boys had mysteriously disappeared from the Faraway hospital.

Hero considered the possibility that the pair had left this behind for them, as something symbolic. *Another apology maybe*. Maybe something meant for her?

Nobody knew why the two of them had disappeared, but nobody else knew the full context behind their struggle. What they had done and revealed to their friends.

Hero had seen the condition Basil was in while the blonde had laid unconscious in the hospital. The doctors had told them that he easily could have died. Hero had initially wondered if Sunny himself was responsible for Basil's condition, but that suspicion didn't last long.

Hero was far from being a real doctor, but from what he could tell the injury seemed much more likely to have been self-inflicted.

**Self-inflicted**.

*Basil almost killed Sunny that night.* Sunny had suffered direct ocular evisceration via a pair of used gardening shears. The younger boy had been lucky that sharp edge hadn't reached his brain.

Hero was the one who found them first, but the others came in shortly after. The whole event was a blur to him now. Hero had never seen that much blood in his life. He wasn't sure he was cut out for the medical field anymore. Thinking about it for even a second made his stomach turn.

In a panic, Hero demanded Kel hold a blanket over Sunny's hemorrhaging eye. His brother had managed to do exactly as he was asked, and Sunny's bleeding seemed to slow somewhat.

*The same could not be said about Basil.*

Hero took care of Basil. He tried to hold the wound closed as best he could, but his hands were violently shaking and there was *so, so much blood.*

*Basil's friend had to force himself not to look directly at the cut itself. When he did, he could see the faint outline of the boy's intestines poking through.*

Polly called 911. Aubrey had ran to the bathroom to grab them towels to stop the bleeding, but ended up passing out shortly after she returned. The ambulance had arrived quickly, but those moments in Basil's bedroom felt like an eternity.

After the two of them had been taken away by the professionals, Hero sat down by himself on the sidewalk, mind still reeling from what he'd seen. Kel was trying to tell him something, but Hero couldn't understand what his brother was saying for whatever reason.

Hero stared down at the asphalt, and then at his bloodstained hands. *Entirely red*. It was all over his arms, his clothes… every inch of him...

There was a dull ringing in the back of Hero's head as he tried and failed over and over to recompose himself. The only sound that stood out to Hero was someone sobbing behind him. He wasn't entirely certain of it, but it sounded like Aubrey had returned to consciousness. Kel was shaking Hero's arm now, but the older boy still couldn't make out his brother's words. Kel had tears in his eyes. Hero hadn't seen him like that in a very long time.

His brother left him and Hero stood back up again. Kel had gone in an attempt to comfort Aubrey instead, but it didn't seem to be working… she just pulled at her hair and cried. Aubrey didn't seem aware of anything outside herself. *She kept apologizing to a boy who wasn't here anymore.*

Hero vacantly stared off into the distance where the ambulance had sped away, while feeling the slow trickle of blood drip off of his hands and onto the asphalt. And yet, in spite of the horror which loomed all around him, Hero couldn't help but feel a bizarre sense of déjà vu welling up inside his head. It was all so strangely familiar. That a day which had previously been so hopeful was callously smashed to pieces without warning. Mari had seemed so nervous and excited for their upcoming recital. Hero knew the two of them were going to be great.

*They would have been.*

Hero stared down at the polaroid in his hands and felt burning tears fall from his face, the mixture of intense emotions he felt steadily becoming impossible to bear.

If he had known the truth back then, would he have even tried to save them? Hero wouldn't have abandoned them, would he?

*Maybe that's what they deserved.*

The blonde had turned those shears on his own intestines. Basil had intended to kill himself. Now they were both gone again. Disappeared. Left somewhere alone together.

*Had the two of them ran off to… to…*

**Hero took a deep breath, and violently screamed into his hands**. He screeched and growled and groaned and cursed, using the desperate force of his lungs to crush the lingering emotions out of his chest.

This was his fault. He should've done something. He should have told them something before they were gone, while he still had the chance. He should have told them how much Mari cared about them. He should have told them that sometimes terrible accidents happened and that the two of them were just kids... *even if speaking those words aloud would have made him ill.*

*He should have told them he forgave them, even if it wasn't true.*

He should have told them that he was grateful. Grateful they had finally confessed. Grateful that he now knew that the girl he loved more than anything hadn't killed herself.

He shouldn't have let more of the people in his life quickly slip through his fingers.

**Mari cared about all of them so much, and as soon as she was gone Hero had set them each aside like they were nothing.** Now two more of his old friends were likely dead and there wasn't a fucking thing he could do about it. Hero was so busy stewing in his own bitterness and resentment that he had discarded everything Mari would have wanted for them. *He betrayed her*.

Aubrey shut herself away again. Hero had tried to get her out of her room once, but her door no longer opened for anyone. He tried to come up with some meaningful words to help her through the horrible truth the three of them had been exposed to, but he didn't believe any of his own sentiment. Aubrey never responded, so Hero told her he would check on her again. Kel did too. Hero wondered if she had ever opened the door for Kel, but he couldn't bring himself to ask.

When he left Aubrey's doorway, her mother was still just sitting on the couch staring at nothing. Not acknowledging anything that was happening around her. Hero had to fight back the urge to smash one of those empty bottles into her empty head.

Kel was no longer himself. He still joked around and smiled, trying to be there for Aubrey, but his eyes were completely dead. Hero could barely stand looking at him like that. He moved around like a puppet, carrying out the small responsibilities and obligations he had before, but he wasn't there. *Kel was always so good at hiding it, but he couldn't hide this.*

Kel would sometimes try to talk to him about what had happened, but Hero could barely bring himself to listen.

His little brother was still trying to hold the three of them together like they had promised to do before. He had lost his friends all over again, but he was still putting in the effort. It was

more than his older brother had done.

*Hero.* What a bad punchline.

Hero pounded his fist into the side of a tree, ferociously gritting his teeth. He growled in frustration again, sick to his stomach.

Sunny revealing the truth to his friends had sent the three of them spiraling, but watching the two boys disappear had seemingly finished the job. Hero felt like the entire universe had been gutted and stripped away. There was no hope in anything anymore. *Reconciling with your old friends?* Not if they're dead.

Their visit to the treehouse felt like some kind of sick joke now. Everything that was looking up that one day was now firmly facing the ground.

Hero swallowed the bile that built up in his throat, and felt it burn on the way back down.

***Fuck**. There had to be something.*

"Mari, I'm sorry… I can't- I can never do anything-" he muttered to himself, staring down into the dirt.

*Where?* Where could the two of them have gone?

During their extended stay at the hospital, Sunny and Basil had become somewhat of local celebrities.

Sunny himself had become rather notable around town in the days prior to the two of them being hospitalized, having seemingly helped many people in Faraway with their specific problems. Hero wasn't aware of most of it at the time, but it appeared as if Sunny had really come out of his shell after Kel got him to leave his house. Ironically, **he** had temporarily become the local hero of Faraway. A single ray of sunshine in a lonely town that often needed one.

What events transpired that had ended up with the boy missing an eye and in emergency care was unclear to the public at large, but people still seemed to express their sincere empathy. Strangers around town talked quietly about a fight with an old friend which the boy had gotten himself caught in. One that had taken a mysterious and brutal turn.

Basil would've likely appeared as more of a villain in this story, but the nurses in the hospital already seemed to know him, and spoke of the blonde very gently. The recent death of Basil's grandmother had painted him in a somewhat tragic light. *Word spread fast in a small town like Faraway.*

The story of two boys becoming loving best friends at the hospital following the aftermath a vicious fight might have certainly seemed like a heartwarming tale from an outsider's perspective, but all of it rang very differently to Hero. If only everyone else had known the context.

Their sudden disappearance a few weeks later was branded as a horrible tragedy. For the first two days after they disappeared, Faraway was swarming with activity from the local law enforcement. Many people in town actively distrusted the homeless men who took refuge in the park, and the police seemed to believe that one of those strange individuals had something to do with the pair's sudden vanishment. *Hero had his doubts.* He spat on the ground.

Having emptied his rage and filled himself with a hopeless misery, Hero walked back out of the forest and into the lake clearing once more.

The wind raged violently across Hero's hair. The torrential rain had stopped recently, but armies of storm clouds still loomed overhead, flashes of lightning making their grand displays in the distant sky. Booming thunder growled and grumbled incessantly from some unseen seat in the heavens.

Coinciding alongside the other events in Hero's life, it really did feel as if the entire world was ending. This kind of weather was almost unheard of. It had been raining nearly nonstop for days. The streets of Faraway were practically underwater.

Hero was staring at the ground, lost in thought. He felt as if thinking to himself was all he could do anymore. These recent events had completely uprooted his mind. All that time he had spent studying that spring felt so insignificant, so narcissistic.

*Studying to save lives? Hahaha!* You couldn't save a single one of them. Mari is rolling in her grave. *Spinning on her rope.*

Hero lifted his head in response to the sound of something swiftly moving towards him. A person was quickly approaching. A girl with glasses. Kim looked very upset.

**"WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU?!"** She abruptly yelled in Hero's face. The older boy took a step back.

Hero suddenly found himself surrounded by Aubrey's gang of friends. Some of them looked at him with angry suspicion, but others with sad frowns of empathy. All of them looked somewhat afraid. *Worried*. Their pink-haired leader was notably absent.

"Why won't she tell me anything? Why did everything fall apart for her right after you freaks showed up?!" Kim ranted incomprehensibly.

*"Calm down."* Hero said, a bit more harshly than he intended. The rest of the group behind her took small steps forward, their expressions becoming slightly more aggressive. Hero swallowed and took a breath.

"DON'T YOU **DARE** TELL ME TO CALM DOWN!!" Kim yelled in outrage.

Kim's brother put his hand on her shoulder, but she swatted it away. Hero managed to compose himself to some extent and opened his mouth to speak.

*"Aubrey just needs some time by herself. I want to talk to her too, but I think giving her space is the only thing we can do right now… "* Hero said, his eyes shifting to the side as he thought aloud. "Please don't throw any rocks through her window. I'm sure that she will leave her room eventually…"

"**SHE ISN'T IN HER HOUSE YOU IDIOT!!**" Kim screeched at Hero. "SHE'S IN THE HOSPITAL!!"

*Hospital? What?* Aubrey was in the hospital? Why would Aubrey be…

Hero felt the bile crawl back up into his mouth. *Aubrey had hurt herself.*

"She wont stop blaming herself for Basil and Sunny vanishing after they almost killed each other... Like it's **her** who did it, somehow. She won't listen to me! I KNOW THIS IS YOU AND YOUR IDIOT BROTHER'S FAULT. **DO SOMETHING!**"

*Hero didn't know how to respond. He wanted to ask what Aubrey had done, but he was afraid to.*

"I-I…" Hero attempted.

*"She's.. She **is** going to live, right?"* Hero asked, incapable of restraining himself.

For him, the entire world seemed to freeze in tension.

Kimberly didn't yell anymore. She didn't speak. She just bit down on her lip and nodded, tears in her eyes.

**Okay**. Hero just needed to go make sure Aubrey was fine. Be there for her. He could do that. Aubrey couldn't lock him out of a hospital room.

*This was a one-time event, right? Because all the wounds they felt were still fresh? Aubrey wouldn't do anything again, would she?*

If Aubrey lost Sunny after just getting him back, and Basil killed himself after the way she had treated him, then Aubrey was never going to recover. Hero would lose her, too.

*If Aubrey…*

If Aubrey was gone, how would that effect **Kel**? Hero knew he couldn't take any more of this, so what about his little brother?

*If she left, would Kel follow?*

**Hero felt like he was going to scream.**

*Were the six of them just cursed? Is this all that life was? Struggling to stay afloat until they couldn't stand to be away from Mari any longer?*

Shadows bent in cutting angles around Hero's mind, etching horrible possibilities further and further into his head.

*What would he have wanted to do?*

If he had killed his brother, and lied about it for years, would he be able to bring himself to do anything other than die?

*Sunny didn't die*. He stayed alive like that. He continued living as an animated corpse for four entire years. Would he seriously run off and die right after he had come clean having gone on for that long? Did Basil have some kind of influence on his actions? Maybe the two of them had a good reason for disappearing?

*People talked about how the two boys had become friends again in the hospital, but was that really the case?* Did Basil resent Sunny for doing what he did? For killing Mari? For leaving him alone to bear the truth himself?

*That didn't seem right. Basil had kept his half of the truth a secret for a terribly, terribly long time. Hero felt sick.*

Sunny and Basil were alive. They had to be.

That's what Hero would have to convince Aubrey of, even if it wasn't true.

At that time Hero wasn't sure why, but for some reason he felt as if that **was** the truth. Basil and Sunny weren't gone yet. They still had a chance.

*Watch me, Mari. I'm not going to run away anymore.*

***I'll prove it.***

---

*Sunny is losing his mind.*

The frigid wind tears viciously at Sunny's face, but he doesn't notice it. He's too busy staring at people who keep crawling out of his head.

There's a pink bow in her long black hair, and a gleeful smile on her face. Sunny had missed seeing her smile like that. Did his friend still make bright, joyful expressions like those? Sunny wondered. The last time they'd spoken, she had seemingly become a much more reserved person. *That was Sunny's fault.*

*Would her younger self have been happy if she knew that she had such beautiful pink hair now? Her favorite color.*

He stares off into the distance, trying to discern the intentions in her eyes but afraid to move any closer. Aubrey is gesturing at him from the snowstorm. She waves her arms up and down. At first she simply looks ecstatic to see him, but that expression fades quickly as Aubrey starts trying to explain something to Sunny using her limbs. *Charades part two.*

This again. Sunny doesn't know what any of that means.

*Aubrey, please… I don't understand anything that's happening anymore…*

Sunny runs his fingers across the hem of his pocket, afraid to look at its contents again. He had only glanced at what he'd found for but a moment, but Sunny was already forced to hide it away from himself in an attempt to stay calm. Nothing about this made sense.

Aubrey puffs out one side of her cheek, looking somewhat despondent. She's trying to tell him something but the two of them can't communicate. Aubrey holds out both of her hands in front of her.

She gestures with her index and middle fingers, swinging them back and forth in alternating time with one another. Aubrey does this with both hands at once, miming two instances of human legs moving forward. *Walking. Two people walking.*

Sunny grimaces as the cold wind bites at his missing eye. His head is killing him.

Aubrey lightly taps her skull as if insisting that her friend needs to think harder. *Aubrey, please. He's trying...*

Sunny takes a half-step closer to Aubrey, but the girl just begins to fade away. She lets out a defeated smile and tries to raise her hand one last time in farewell, but before she could even manage to lift it, Aubrey was already gone.

Sunny stands still now, his vision shrinking. *The entire world is mocking him.*

Sunny stood in the snow, and stared out into the distance where his old friend had disappeared. He feels himself constricted on all sides by the growing panic in his chest. He can't breathe.

**Someone touches him from behind.** The boy lunges forwards, suddenly filled with fear at the thought of facing the person behind him. He turns around to look at his best friend's shocked expression, clearly unnerved by the way Sunny was looking at him.

*Sunny needed to tell him something. Anything. If he shared what he had seen the two of them would be able to figure it out together…*

But Sunny couldn't speak. His words were broken and made no sense. He started to wonder if speaking up was even the right choice to make…

Basil reached forwards but Sunny stepped back, shaking his head. Sunny tried to call out the blonde's name, but his lungs wouldn't allow it.

Sunny's head had been killing him all day, but the pain finally started to grow weaker as his vision began to fill with mindless static. Sunny was drooping downwards now.

Sunny felt the sensation of something cold pressing against his body, and the vague feeling that someone was calling out his name.

*Sorry, Basil.*

# Nothing had Changed

Chapter Summary

Thanks for reading, thanks for commenting. Have a nice day.

*Sunny is on the ground again.*

**Basil feels like he must be trapped in some kind of nightmare.**

*He starts carrying Sunny back inside the building, but doesn't even remember picking him up. Everything is a blur. The wind is terribly loud, but Basil feels as if he can still hear his own heartbeat pounding in his ears.*

The pain in his stomach is worse than it had ever been. Basil's feet are sore and pink. He carries Sunny through the lobby, but his friend is making it difficult.

*Sunny is squirming.*

Despite remaining unconscious, Sunny seemed almost as if he was fighting against himself. His arms thrashed slightly as he kicked his legs in a fit of unconscious desperation. Basil sets him down in the hall. If Sunny kept moving around like that then the blonde was going to drop him.

**"Sunny!"** Basil calls out to his friend. The boy's eyelid flutters open for a moment, but his pupil lacks focus. He breathes heavily.

Basil doesn't understand. What could have possibly happened outside that had triggered Sunny to react like this?

The blonde stopped.

*"...two."* That's what he had said before he fell over.

Two? Two what? *People?*

*Basil felt a chill run down his spine.*

**Had Sunny seen someone outside?** Is that why he had started panicking? Did he remember something that Basil didn't?

Basil whipped his head back towards the door in the lobby. It didn't look like anything was out there, but…

Basil grabbed Sunny by his shoulders and dragged him into the closest display room, immediately closing the door behind them. The two quietly shivered together on the floor of the mock dining space. Basil listened for any potential sounds beyond the door, but all he heard was Sunny struggling to regain consciousness on the ground.

The blonde turned his head back to his friend. To Basil's horror, Sunny had somehow managed to start standing himself up again, but barely got to lift his chest off the carpet before he fell back to the floor. Sunny stopped moving this time.

"**S-Sunny! P-Please!** It's okay… *everything is going to be okay…"* Basil cried, rubbing up and down on his friends arm. He softly ran his fingers through the boy's hair, trying to comfort him. Sunny's arms remained tense, but his breathing relaxed somewhat.

*Basil's own breaths only increased in frequency, however.* Watching Sunny like this had seemingly sent him over the edge. The blonde sat on that floor, kneeling next to his unconscious friend for what felt like hours but was incapable of composing himself. He simply kept petting Sunny while he slept; partially for his friend's comfort, and partially for his own.

After a few minutes had past, Basil managed to reconstitute himself. *Sunny would wake up. He was going to wake up. He just needed rest.*

Basil put his frostbitten feet back on the floor and resumed moving his friend. He no longer had the strength to pick Sunny up completely, so he dragged him once more by the shoulders until he reached the bedroom that had become their unfortunate base of operations.

With one final rush of adrenaline, Basil managed to lift his friend just enough to get him into bed. He wasn't even sure if he should be moving Sunny at all, but this had worked out last time, and he was desperate. The blonde stared at Sunny's unconscious form, his arm flopped outward at a strange angle. *The sight of the other boy's awkward position led Basil to feel himself begin to panic once more.*

Basil set his friend's arm back by his side and then wrapped Sunny's body under a blanket. He propped a pillow under Sunny's head and then pinched his own neck to keep himself from passing out due to fear or exhaustion.

*Sunny is okay. He's okay. He's just sleeping.*

Basil could feel SOMETHING sinister filling up the room around them, but he tried his best to ignore it. He didn't have time to freak out right now. Basil stepped away from the bed but had a bit of trouble maintaining his balance due to the swollen skin on his feet. The blonde looked back at Sunny one more time before making a mad dash through the door and back down the hallway, returning to the lobby to retrieve his blanket that was filled with the rocks Sunny had gathered earlier. He knew he shouldn't have been running with the cut on his stomach, but he didn't care.

Basil returned to their room and began placing the stones under Sunny's blankets, around his legs and torso.

They were very warm. Basil hoped none of them were too hot, as he didn't want Sunny to thrash around again and hurt himself. He stood back and looked over Sunny once again. The other boy's breath was slow and steady.

*Basil suddenly collapsed on the ground. He laid himself down on the floor and rested his eyes for a moment. The room was spinning.*

The blonde reopened his eyes and lifted the underside of his shirt to examine the source of the faint dripping sensation that he had only just noticed sliding eerily down his abdomen. *It wasn't that bad. It was only leaking a little.*

Basil stopped looking directly at it. He was getting dizzy.

The gardener stood up and walked into the bathroom, taking one of the reddened towels from earlier and wiping the stray drops of blood off of his stomach. His nausea only increased in strength as he tended to his wound, so Basil took a seat on the floor and tried to unwind himself. He looked over the gash until it finally stopped weeping, and slowly stood back up.

The boy turned and stared at his pitiful reflection in the mirror. He looked horrible.

*Basil suddenly felt a surge of burning anger flare inside his chest.*

He started peeling the bandages off his face. Each cut stung in protest as he exposed them to the cold air. A single droplet of blood built up on his chin and fell into the sink.

Basil glared coldly at himself. *That was better*.

The blonde checked on his stomach one more time to make sure the bleeding had concluded. It remained dry. *No more distractions.* Basil left the bathroom.

Incapable of thinking about sleep, Basil sat down next to the coffee table and rubbed one of the warm stones between his hands. He curled up in a blanket on the floor and rested himself against one of the chairs. Basil patiently waited for the room to stop feeling so wobbly.

He closed his eyes, and then opened them again weakly. *Still there. Sunny is still there…*

---

*Horrible images and sensations twisted around in Sunny's head after he fell unconscious. The black-haired dreamer reopened his eyelids a few times, but everything seemed like a nonsensical blur. Was his body moving? Sunny couldn't think straight. Why did he feel so panicked? Where was he?*

*Sunny struggled to open his eye again. The air around him was cold, but he could feel himself moving slightly. He was going somewhere. How was he going somewhere if he wasn't awake? Someone was carrying him. Aubrey was probably taking him to… wait, what?*

*Aubrey? Why did he think Aubrey was carrying him? Something about that didn't make sense.*

*Pink hair. Aubrey looked pretty good with pink hair, didn't she? Wait, was her hair black or pink? One of those was a dream.*

***Dreams**. Sunny had been dreaming a few days ago, struggling against such terrible nightmares which now effortlessly evaded his memory. Basil was in those dreams. The two of them were trapped alone together. Sunny desperately wanted to comfort his friend, but for some reason he simply couldn't.*

***Sunny was afraid.** Sunny felt so terribly frightened but wasn't entirely sure why, and that fact only made his fear grow faster. He could hear the reverberations of his own heartbeat pounding inside his head. He needed to tell someone something important. Sunny didn't have time to be unconscious right now. He needed to WAKE UP. If Sunny kept falling asleep he was going to lose everything all over again. He felt himself trying to stand up but he also felt as if he was puppeteering his own body from a distance. Sunny wanted to scream. He was going to fall asleep again. He was going to pass through a white door in a white room, and abandon all the things he needed to do in favor of locking himself in a pleasant fantasy that would kill his fears and dull his mind.*

*Sunny would once again become trapped in an endless cycle of long, painful searches, losing someone dear to him over and over, and each time have to watch as his friends grew to forget the kind, sad boy that they were missing.*

***"Basil? Who is Basil?"*** His friends would ask.

*He struggled. Sunny thrashed his arms and tried to cry out but no sounds left his mouth. Water. He was in the lake again. Sunny was going to drown in here. Mari, please…*

*The shadowy tendrils built up around him and pulled at his limbs. Sunny couldn't keep fighting anymore. He had failed. Sunny stopped thrashing, and let the darkness take him. The heartbeat started to grow silent. There was no way out.*

*Eventually, Sunny felt a pleasant, warm sensation building up around him and something soft pressing down on his chest. He stopped trying to wake back up and simply allowed his mind to fall into a dull, fuzzy comfort. Everything was going to be okay. Someone was looking over him. Sunny could feel it.*

*Sunny could let himself dream. He would come back again.*

---

Strangely enough, Sunny dreamt of Hero.

It appeared as if nobody else was around, so it was just Hero and him. Hero was baking cookies for his little sister, and Sunny was doing his best to help him out. It was quiet, the sun

was just starting to lower from the sky, and Sunny could hear the faint sound of birds chirping outside.

Something about this situation felt odd to Sunny. Had something like this ever happened before? Shouldn't the others be here too?

Sunny stole a quick glance at Hero's face. It felt like it had been forever since Sunny had seen him. But neither of them were speaking at the moment, both somewhat absorbed in the process of shaping of the dough. Sunny couldn't yet figure out why, but he felt horribly sad as he molded the batter in front of him. He fought back the insistent tears that kept trying to grow in his eyes as he worked.

Hero noticed that he was struggling to hold something in and casually set his palm on Sunny's shoulder.

"Are you feeling alright, Sunny? You don't have to help me right now if you don't feel up to it." Sunny shook his head.

Hero looked out the window and off into the distance, thinking to himself for a moment.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Hero asked him.

Sunny didn't shake his head, but he didn't say anything either. *Did he want to ask Hero something?*

Hero spoke softly.

"You'll look after him, right? Mari cared a lot about the both of you. I can try to watch out for him if I'm around but I know things are… really tough between all of us right now."

Sunny tilted his head for a moment. *Him.* Who was him? *Kel?*

*No, Basil. Hero was talking about Basil.*

Sunny felt his face fall into a hopeless frown. Sunny and him had fought. *He hurt Basil.* He hurt Basil and he was going to do it again. Nothing had changed.

All he ever did was lie. All he ever did was lie and forget and run away. He was still exactly the same. Even after his sister died, even after he had lost everything, he still couldn't change himself.

"…I know he was always particularly close to you. If you can reach out to him, I'm sure that he'll respond to it." Hero paused for a moment.

"I know this is really selfish, but can I ask you to watch out for him for me? Not to make things better between us, just… so Basil is okay. I think he really needs someone right now."

Hero paused again.

*"I don't… I..."*

Hero's voice cracked.

*"I just don't want Mari to be mad at me."*

Sunny felt himself starting to wake up again. He realized this was a dream. *Of course it was a dream!* Hero hated Sunny. There's no way Hero would be this kind to him after what he had done. Once more, Sunny had escaped into his own mind to fabricate a version of his friend that he knew he didn't deserve.

Hero noticed Sunny starting to look away. The older boy walked around the countertop and somberly looked down at his assistant's head. Sunny raised his face to look at him once more.

Hero quickly kneeled down, and gave Sunny a hug. Everything around Sunny suddenly seemed so quiet for a moment. All he could hear was Hero's gentle breaths.

Sunny knew it was all fake, but he couldn't help himself. He hugged Hero back and wept silently into his shoulder. Hero scratched his fingers gingerly through the boy's hair.

*I'm sorry… I'm sorry…*

---

Sunny woke up.

*His friend was no longer wearing the hat.*

Basil's hair was a mess. Several of the bandages that were on his face were now missing, revealing tiny red cuts and scratches in his skin. The bruise on his eye that had previously begun to fade somehow looked as if it had gone backwards in time. Basil looked like he been through hell.

*Sunny was back in that same bed as before. That same bed which now felt like a coffin.*

"SUNNY!" He abruptly called out upon noticing the boy's eye had opened. "Are you okay? **Drink!**" Basil shoved a bottle of water into his hands. Sunny started taking a sip, but he was having trouble holding the bottle steady. His hands were shaking.

"You were freaking out… you kept stuttering like you were trying to say something and then you just fell over! What happened?"

Sunny's hand subconsciously started lowering underneath the blanket, making its way down to his pants pocket. Sunny was horrified at the idea that its contents had been removed. He slid his fingers inside, and felt something thin poke back at him. *It was still there.* A small item Sunny had quietly slid into his possession before he passed out again. Something important he found outside. **Had Basil seen it while he was unconscious?**

*It isn't as if it even proved anything, it was just strange to have found it out there. This wasn't anyone's fault.*

Sunny felt himself start to panic again. What the fuck would he say to his friend if Basil had taken it out of his pocket and looked at it? How would he explain why he was hiding that from him? If he told Basil he had just found it right then, would the blonde possibly believe him?

Basil must have noticed that he was starting to grow afraid. The blonde's eyes widened in response, Sunny's fear beginning the infect the room around him.

"Did you see someone? **Sunny! D-Did you see s-someone else out there?**" Basil asked, moving insistently towards Sunny. The boy subconsciously moved backwards into his pillow.

**"W-Why aren't you saying anything???"**

Sunny couldn't speak. He couldn't breathe. The room was spinning and he felt bile trying to climb up his throat.

**"Sunny, PLEASE!!!"**

Basil had such beautiful blue eyes, that somehow always managed to shine even in the darkness. Gorgeous blue eyes. Horrible, terrifying blue eyes that bore into his soul. Eyes that could and would destroy him.

*Sunny had never been more afraid of those eyes in his entire life.*

# Liar Part 1

Chapter Summary

*Is that a secret in your pocket or are you just afraid to see Basil?*

Sorry that I can't immediately tell you what Sunny is hiding, but I found the story actually makes more sense if it stays concealed for a bit. Thanks for reading.

**“Sunny! D-Did you see s-someone else out there?”**

Sunny was awake again, and Basil was asking him questions. Basil was absolutely terrified, and Sunny needed to say something to calm the other boy down as quickly as possible. Unfortunately for him, Sunny was just as frightened.

*“W-Why aren’t you saying anything??? **Sunny, PLEASE!!!** Why are you so scared? You saw someone out there, didn’t you??"*

Sunny shook his head for a second but then stopped. He slowly pulled his hand away from his pocket under the covers, trying to steel his nerves. Whatever he said next could be dangerous to them both.

“I did… kind of.” Sunny stated, trying to figure out what to tell Basil that wouldn't send him spiraling.

*“K-Kind of? W-What are you talking about? **You aren’t making sense!"***

“It wasn’t really… real.” Sunny said, trying to steady his breathing. Basil stared at him, mouth slightly ajar in fearful confusion.

*Idiot.* He chastised himself. Sunny should have told him earlier, back when he had seen Kel. This was going to be so much harder now. Basil would understand, but Sunny should still have brought it up before...

*“I used. I used to- During the few days after I left my house. I would. Sometimes…”* Sunny struggled, trying to find the words and force them out.

“S-Sometimes?” Basil prodded, watching him carefully. He looked as if he was about to watch a bomb go off.

“*Hallucinate*. I would hallucinate a lot of things that weren’t actually there.” Sunny nervously stated.

Basil's eyelids fluttered slightly. "*Hallucinate?* Like… SOMETHING around you? Something bad?" The blonde's hands shook, and he picked at his own fingers as if trying to calm himself. Basil scratched feverishly at the top of his nails.

"No. Not just stuff like that, I mean." Sunny stated. "Other things too. Objects from my dreams, people from my past…" Sunny trailed off. *"You, sometimes."* He admitted, feeling blood climb up to his face.

*"O-Oh."* Basil responded.

Basil seemed to chew on what Sunny had said for a moment, his eyebrows knit in concern.

"So, when you were standing out in the snow and didn't respond to me, you were… seeing something? Hallucinating something scary?"

"Yeah. I saw, uh… *Aubrey.*"

*That was kind of a strange follow-up.* For a second Sunny felt as if Basil might burst out laughing at what he had just said, but Basil continued listening in silence, the blonde's expression remaining deadly serious.

*That made sense. Basil knew better than anyone how scary Aubrey could be.*

Basil was staring at him. The blonde's friend wanted to elaborate further on what he had said, but he was distracted.

Sunny subconsciously touched the item in his pocket again. Sunny needed to tell him about it **now**. It would only become more confusing the longer he waited. Sunny shouldn't be hiding this from his friend.

*Stop panicking. He's going to notice. You can't tell him yet. Not until you're sure it's safe.*

"...*Sunny?* You were saying something about Aubrey?" Basil prodded him, seemingly confused by his sudden pause.

Sunny nodded, and opened his mouth to continue. What he had said was technically all true, although it wasn't everything he wanted to say. But he needed Basil to believe that alone had scared him so terribly.

He didn't **want** to lie to Basil, but he had to keep his cards to himself until he could be absolutely sure that revealing what he found was the correct choice to make. If Basil started freaking out the way Sunny had while they were stuck here alone together, he wasn't sure if he could stay sane. He wasn't sure he could bring Basil back down from that.

Beyond that, could Sunny really trust Basil? Could he trust his friend didn't know anything about what Sunny had seen?

*Stop that. That's ridiculous. You're starting to sound like...*

*Him?*

*Yeah, him.* Basil had said it himself, hadn't he? Suggested that he might've been the one who had taken them out here. Was he trying to throw Sunny off? Could Basil really have done something like that? Why would he be lying to him? Basil was even more afraid of this whole situation than Sunny was.

"S-Sorry, I just had a weird dream while I was asleep. *Distracted.*" Sunny said, trying not to act too unusual.

Basil paused for a moment, looking as if he might ask about Sunny's dream, but he didn't. He scratched his hair for a moment and spoke.

"So, what was Aubrey doing out there?" The blonde asked.

"Earlier, when you were out in the snow, you kept saying some weird stuff but it didn't really make any sense… were you trying to tell me something?" Sunny's friend inquired. "Was it something about Aubrey? You yelled out *'To!'* I thought you meant the number two, for some reason…" Basil trailed off his line of questions.

*The black-haired teen swallowed slowly.*

Sunny thought back to what he had seen Aubrey miming with her hands. *Two people walking. Who was walking? Him? Him and Basil? Someone else? Should he say that? Is it safe to tell Basil that? Why wouldn't it be?*

"Oh, uh… yeah." Sunny confirmed. "Sorry, I forgot- it wasn't just Aubrey, Kel was there too. I was trying to tell you I was seeing two people right then…" Sunny lied.

**Lie, lie, lie. Sunny always lied about everything. It never ended.**

"I understand." Basil said, seemingly relaxing a bit. His shoulders weren't as tense now. "S-So, what did you see Aubrey and Kel doing out there in the snow?"

"Um…" Sunny mumbled for but a moment. "They were having a big argument about something? They kept pushing and shoving each other, like they were about to have a huge fight. Seeing them standing in snow and attacking each other like that… *It was really unsettling.*" He claimed, feeling increasingly ill with every word he said.

**Liar.**

Basil almost smiled. "Yeah, I can imagine that." He nodded, seemingly expressing belief in what Sunny had told him. Sunny tried to force a smirk, but he couldn't manage it. He ended up frowning sadly instead. He tried to keep the frown from building, but it eventually overtook his entire face.

The blonde took note of his change in demeanor, and a wave of worry became visible in his eyes. "Sunny? Are you okay?" Basil inquired.

*"Sorry."* Sunny apologized. "My uh, my head is really killing me right now…" He stated. At least that one was true.

“Oh!” Basil jumped. “S-Sorry Sunny, just give me one second-“ Basil pulled away from the bed and walked over to his side table where he had left the liquid painkiller the two of them had been taking previously.

The blonde walked back over to Sunny’s side of the bed with the bottle and gingerly twisted it open, preparing to empty some of the liquid onto the spoon below when he suddenly hesitated.

Sunny was somewhat unsettled by Basil’s sudden pause until he realized what was bothering him.

That was the only spoon they had, having come alongside the drug itself. They didn’t have any others, and would likely have to go back to the dining hall to obtain one. The spoon Basil was holding onto had been in his own mouth last.

Basil quickly composed himself and began to pour out a dose onto the plastic utensil, but he was not doing it as well as he had done previously. His hands had begun to just barely tremble, and he ended up spilling quite a bit of the drug onto the floor.

*“O-Oops, haha…”* He mumbled, faking a laugh. “T-That’s my bad. We’ve really messed up the floors around here, huh?” He somewhat morbidly joked, trying to draw attention away from his hands.

Basil held the now-loaded spoon in front of Sunny’s face, and Sunny leaned forward slightly from his pillow to receive it. Sunny felt his cheeks growing somewhat pink as he moved towards the gross liquid.

His lips parted. Basil’s eyes widened just a hint when Sunny accepted the spoon into his mouth. The black-haired liar felt the horrible taste of artificial cherries flood the surface of his tongue once more as he forcibly swallowed his punishment, feeling a painful mixture of disgust and shame.

Sunny opened his eyes and looked back at his friend. Basil hadn’t reacted to the indirect kiss the last time this spoon had been placed inside a mouth, but he did now.

*Basil was blushing **hard**.*

“T-There you go, Sunny! Starting to feel a little better?” He asked, letting out a soft smile through his clearly-visible embarrassment.

“Y-Yeah!” Sunny quickly replied, trying to move past both of their clear discomfort at what had just been left unspoken. “I’m starting to feel a lot better already.”

His friend nervously faked another laugh and held his hand up to his own face, brushing a few stray hairs out of his eyes while he looked away from Sunny’s gaze in embarrassment. Basil’s smile widened slightly.

*Sunny fucking hated himself so much.*

Basil twisted the top back onto the medication. “When you were trying to talk to me back outside, you also said that… something was… *in with something? Does that makes sense?* S-Sorry, that’s stupid. I can’t exactly remember now…” He asked.

Something was in something? What was Basil talking ab-

*Polaroid. The polaroid he found in the truck. The accursed image that was now burning a hole in his pocket.*

All the air in Sunny’s lungs seemed to fight to escape. A dizzying sensation spiraled around his head. Sunny felt as if the entire room might be about to explode.

Sunny remembered wanting to tell him right then, just in case Basil had noticed what he had found when he was still looking at it. He wanted to insist to Basil that he had just picked it up, and that it wasn’t something he had been hiding from him.

*Sunny’s hands were shaking. One of his fingers poked quietly into his pocket again. The photograph almost seemed to bite at his skin.*

**You should let Basil in on your little secret.** A voice taunted Sunny in the back of his mind. **Basil is so good at keeping secrets, isn’t he?**

*Fuck you.*

“Something… in something? S-Sorry Basil, I don’t really think I remember anything like that…”

“Oh no, don’t worry about it, Sunny!” I’m not even sure if that’s what you said… I uh, I was panicking a little bit.” The blonde elaborated.

“Sorry…” Sunny apologized. “It’s like I can’t keep my head off the ground.” The eyepatched boy looked downwards and glared at himself through the covers. *Useless.*

“It’s okay! Y-You were actually doing really well for a really long time… remember all the stuff we carried up from the storage room? You didn’t even trip.” Basil reassured him. “You just fell over again because you got worked up.” The blonde smiled. Sunny felt like trash as he listened to Basil politely comfort him.

“Still, I wish I was… *doing better.* So this wouldn’t keep happening. I hate that this keeps happening.” He stated.

“I…” Sunny’s friend started, but stopped himself. Basil was no longer smiling, and Sunny could see tears that were trying to build up in his eyes. *He froze. What was Basil suddenly upset about?*

Sunny realized what he had said. *He wished he was doing better*. It’s was Basil’s fault he had ended up with a concussion in the first place, and Basil’s fault his vision was now permanently damaged. Sunny’s friend still felt horrible about those things, and blamed himself for every subsequent bad thing that had been happening to him recently. The black-haired cripple grit his teeth slightly. Sunny shouldn’t have said that right now.

*“I’m S-“* Basil started.

“It’s okay.” Sunny cut him off. “We’ll work through this together. I promise I won’t keep falling over all the time.” He reassured his friend.

Basil forced a smile and nodded slightly, tight-lipped.

“H-How are you feeling, Basil? It’s your stomach feeling okay right now?” Sunny inquired.

*“Oh! U-Uh…”*

Basil froze. He lost some of the color in his face. Sunny noticed his eyes dart over to the floor at the foot of the bed for a moment, before bouncing back to Sunny. *What? What was Basil looking at?*

“Good. I’m feeling good.” Basil claimed, suddenly looking extremely embarrassed again. Sunny stared at him quizzically. Basil was acting strange.

“…Are you sure?” Sunny asked again.

“Yep.”

*Okay.*

Sunny tried to glance back over at whatever Basil had been looking towards before, but the blonde pushed something away with his foot, seemingly concealing the point of interest.

*"You must want something to wash that terrible taste out of your mouth with, right?"* Basil moved towards him and pushed the bottle of water back into his grasp.

After handing him his drink once more, Basil moved away from Sunny and walked around the end of the bed. Sunny noted he had bent over to pick something up off the ground and had carried it over to his side of the mattress, but his hand was too low for Sunny to tell what it was. He seemingly placed it next to the side table on his end.

The room turned quiet. *Smoke.* It was like there was a bonfire in here. Sunny could practically smell himself. He never thought that he would feel this way, but he would do almost anything to take a long bath right now.

Sunny considered how unclean this bed must be after how many times the two of them had been in it without washing themselves. Sunny thought back to some of the other display rooms that actually had pricing detailed on the individual furniture items. He swallowed.

*They’d be fine, right? These were extreme circumstances. Nobody could blame them for this.*

The drug Basil gave him took away some of the pain in his head, but the nervous burning sensation in Sunny's stomach only seemed to increase. His hand once more brushed across the image he was concealing. He quietly hoped that Basil might go to the bathroom. He couldn’t finish recomposing himself while the blonde was still here.

Sunny glanced over at Basil as the other boy sat quietly on his own side of the bed. He was silently staring at the wall.

It was somewhat incredible that it had taken him so long to notice, but Sunny suddenly realized that the bed he was in was not cold. In fact, the space around him was quite warm. Sunny moved his legs around under the blankets and felt several hard objects rub up against him. He leaned forward and shoved his hand further under the covers to grab one of the hidden items. *It was a rock.*

To be specific, it was one of the relatively-smooth stones which Sunny had picked up by the side of the building earlier. Basil must have inserted the rocks into his bed in order to preserve some amount of warmth while he was sleeping. The black-haired teen was glad that his stupid idea had resulted in something of value. He quietly sighed through his nose, and for a moment simply enjoyed the sensation of being in a warm bed.

He moved his legs around and tried to make out exactly how many rocks were down there. It didn't seem like as many as Sunny had set by the fire before, so he hoped that meant Basil must have kept the others for his own side of the bed.

*Sunny also hoped he put them in something else when he carried them inside. Some of those rocks had gotten so hot they were practically glowing.*

"Thanks for keeping the bed warm for me, Basil." Sunny joked.

"H-Huh?" The blonde looked back over in his direction. "Oh! Y-Yeah… no problem." He said. "That was a good idea you had. The blankets hold onto the heat pretty well…"

Basil suddenly looked kind of bothered by something. He rotated his body while sitting on the bed so that he was cross-legged and facing slightly more towards Sunny's side. Sunny looked over in his direction, a bit confused by what he was doing. The blonde seemed rather embarrassed when he noticed his friend was watching him moving around. Basil's mouth nervously twitched.

*Uh oh.*

Basil fidgeted awkwardly while he sat. His cheeks were pink and his eyes shifted around the room slightly. The blonde's breaths were seemingly a little more rapid than they should have been. Sunny felt like his friend was about to ask him something.

*"S-So…"*

Basil stopped, as if unsure if he should say what was on his mind.

"H-How many of your hallucinations were of me in particular?" The other boy asked, refusing to meet Sunny's gaze. He stared down at the blankets between them.

Sunny almost choked on his own saliva. *WHY DID BASIL HAVE TO FIXATE ON THAT PART?*

"I-I don't know… I w-wasn't exactly keeping track of them."

“Oh.” Basil responded. *Oh? What was 'Oh?' What did 'Oh' mean?*

“A-Anyway, seeing that stuff was really scary. I hadn’t been hallucinating much since we were in the hospital, but for some reason this image of our friends was extremely vivid. I really started to panic…” Sunny trailed off, trying to avert the subject to literally anything else.

“W-Were…” Basil started, trailing off. “Were any of your hallucinations of me ever… **scary?**” He asked, his voice dropping in volume significantly. He still wouldn’t glance over at Sunny, his eyes locked on the sheets. Basil looked miserable.

*Looking at you is always scary*, Sunny thought to himself. Were his hallucinations of Basil frightening?

*My dreams of you were.* The boy considered, remaining silent.

“No.” Sunny finally responded. “None that I can recall, anyway.”

Basil nodded his head, but it didn’t seem as though he actually accepted that. His blonde friend kept quiet, the room returning to its previous silence. That silence continued for a few minutes until Sunny finally broke it.

"Basil, It's... been a while since I've checked out my eye. I'm going to go to the bathroom for a minute, okay?"

"Oh! I can help you!" Basil offered, already beginning to uncross his legs as if he was going to get up.

"I..." Sunny started.

"I'd like to do it by myself."

Basil paused.

“I really don’t think you should go anywhere by yourself right now, S-Sunny… even the bathroom.” Basil stated, looking nervous.

Sunny opened his mouth to speak, but hesitated for but a second, questioning himself.

*Don't say it. That's a mean trick.*

"Basil... do you remember the last time you looked at my eye?"

The flower boy looked very ashamed of himself. Sunny felt sick.

*"I... I adjusted..."* Basil mumbled.

"It's okay. I'm only going to take a minute, I pr-"

"*No.* it's easier for a second person to rebandage your eye. You should let me do it." Basil insisted.

"I... don't want to stress you out any more than I already have. You look tired. Can't you wait out and here and get yourself a drink? Just lie down for a minute? You don't have to force yourself to help me do everything..." Sunny continued.

Halfway through his argument, Basil's demeanor shifted, as if he was picking at something inside his head. One of the words Sunny said seemed to have clicked with Basil.

"I, uh… actually, you're right. Y-You have been doing okay and I shouldn't be bossing you around this much, haha…"

"You should definitely at least be allowed to go to the bathroom by yourself." The blonde concluded.

Sunny's eyebrows raised. That was… *easy.*

It was almost as if Basil **wanted** him in the bathroom now.

Suddenly, Sunny kind of didn't want to go in the bathroom anymore. *What the fuck is happening?* It was as if the two of them were playing out some kind of twisted comedy routine. The more the two of them spoke, the less anything made sense.

*But Sunny still had to go. He couldn't pass up this opportunity. He needed a moment to himself. Just a moment.*

# Headache

Sunny vividly recalled what had happened the last time he went into the bathroom with Basil waiting outside and promptly locked the door this time, twisting the lock as quietly as possible so the blonde wouldn't take notice.

Once he was sure Basil couldn't get inside, Sunny exhaled silently and stared at himself in the mirror. Sunny's hair was a mess, and his clothes were wrinkled. His deadfaced expression was just barely managing to hide the madness he felt.

*Sunny took a deep breath. He tried to calm down, and failed.*

Sunny took another breath, closing his eyes and focusing on the feeling of air entering his lungs. He felt himself relax slightly. The incessant buzzing in his mind lessened somewhat.

Sunny took a moment to think about what had happened before he fell unconscious.

---

While Basil had hobbled off to the forest to look for a log, Sunny was left alone to tend to the fire. He had to continue desperately poking flammables back into position so they wouldn't set his toes aflame.

After a few minutes had passed and he had gained a bit of warmth, Sunny decided to take another look in the truck. Basil had checked the front of the vehicle the night they arrived, but Sunny did not. He was curious if he could find anything in there that might've been able to give them a clue as to how they had ended up at such a bizarre place. It wasn't dark outside now, so maybe the morning light would reveal some evidence of the vehicle's operator.

Luckily for him, the door had been left unlocked. Sunny briefly poked around in the cabin of the truck. *No keys.* It smelled kind of weird, like someone had been smoking. The cup holder had a single empty can of Orange Joe sitting within it. Sunny poked around in the glove compartment, but didn't find anything notable hiding within. No gloves, just a few papers and napkins stacked on top of each other. Sunny ran his fingers through them, and found that there was a small box hidden under the mess. He pulled it out and took a look. It was a seemingly-forgotten box of cigarettes that only had a few sticks remaining. *Sunny froze.* He had never held a box of cigarettes in his life. The boy's father would have heavily scolded Sunny for what he now held in his hands. His mother would've killed him if she found him anywhere near something like this. *Basil probably would, too.*

---

*The closest thing Sunny had ever been to something like this was some fake candy cigarettes that some unconcerned individual had put into his bucket for Halloween. The rest of his friends had headed back home for the night, and left Sunny alone on the living room carpet to look over his haul of unhealthy treats. Curious, he removed a stick from the cigarette box and put it in his mouth, sucking on it slightly. It did not taste particularly good.*

His sister walked in from the kitchen while drying her hands on a towel, seemingly having just finished rinsing the dishes that were left over in the sink. She looked over at Sunny's careful inspection of his Halloween goods and quickly walked over to him.

"*Hmmm?* You shouldn't put these things in your mouth, Sunny! Smoking is bad for you!" She joked, stealing the sugared box away from his hands. She pulled out a singular stick for herself, and placed it between her lips as if taking a pull. "What would everyone else think!"

*"You've been very bad, little brother."* She said, faking a deep, gruff voice. She pulled the candy out of her mouth and pretended to blow. "I'm afraid that you will have to answer to the bossman over this one…" His sister claimed, imitating some kind of cartoonish gangster. Sunny stared at her and smirked.

Sunny grabbed the stick poking out of his own mouth and bit down on the end of the cigarette, thinking that it might taste a little better chewed instead. *Nope. Still gross.*

*Mari smiled at the somewhat disappointed look on Sunny's face and laughed. "Not a fan?" She asked.*

---

The boy shook his head, trying to remove himself from the grasp of the now-painful memories which quietly lingered in the long-concealed recesses of his mind. He continued looking around the truck but found nothing of particular interest. Sunny scratched the back of his head. It hurt a bit when he did.

Sunny was just about to finally call it quits as he stepped down from the truck's cabin with his head still turned towards the vehicle's interior. Before he closed the driver's side door, he noticed something that stuck out to him.

In-between the center console and the driver's seat there was a small piece of paper awkwardly standing upright on the ground, as if it had been accidentally dropped onto the floor but had stayed standing since it was stuck between two objects, like a dollar bill poking out of the top of a wallet.

Something about the piece of paper seemed really familiar to Sunny. It was a certain size, and a certain shape… some detail about it wriggled into the boy's head.

Sunny suddenly felt like he was in danger, but didn't understand why. *It's just a piece of paper. Someone just dropped a piece of paper on the floor. Who cares?*

Sunny almost felt like something was behind him. The paper was just outside of Sunny's reach, he would have to step back inside of the cabin to take it.

Sunny leaned off of the side of the truck and looked off into the distance. Basil was coming back already. He was dragging something heavy behind him.

The boy briefly glanced back at the piece of paper, and then back at his friend. Basil needed help, whatever weird obsession Sunny had with a paper square could wait.

The two of them dragged the branch back towards the parking lot, and Sunny began breaking off bits to place in the fire while Basil tried to reheat his feet. Once the flame was burning away, Sunny took a seat but found his mind still fixated on the one item in the truck that he had left untouched.

The two spent some more time alone by the fire together before Sunny suggested he be the one who would go over to the forest to add additional branches onto the fire. Basil demanded he stay.

"Can't you stay here? *For me?"*

*Why did he have to say it like that? He couldn't keep doing that. It was cheating.*

Sunny hesitantly suggested burning one of the mattresses. They would probably be fairly heavy, but the two of those were a lot closer than anything natural, and both Sunny and Basil seemed opposed to destroying expensive furniture if they could manage to avoid it.

The wind kept picking up. The fire became increasingly dangerous, its quickly-burning contents being turned into terrifyingly unpredictable projectiles by the increasing wind.

Basil finally agreed to sacrifice one of the mattresses. The two of them dragged it out and pressed it into the flames before retreating a safe distance away. The fire kept building in size until it was no longer viable to continue standing near it with the raging wind. The two boys retreated into the building. Tiny scraps of burning cloth flew into the air in a torrent. Hopefully the snow would prevent anything from catching ablaze, wherever those bits ended up.

Basil insisted they go back outside to retrieve the chairs Sunny had dragged out there before they were lost in the cold. Sunny felt as if doing so should not have been a real priority to them, but he nodded in agreement anyway, seeing this as the last chance to satiate his shadowy desire to inspect the item in the truck which had spoken such soft warnings into his mind.

Sunny left his chair on the ground and moved towards the vehicle. When Basil's back was turned whilst the blonde was putting his seat back inside, Sunny ran over to the truck, quickly pulled open the side door, and grabbed the piece of paper off of the ground. He reached out and snatched it with his thumb, swiftly pulling it into his possession.

*He took the piece of paper out, but wished that he hadn't.*

He looked at it for but a single, hurried moment... and time froze. The quiet sound of the wind around him seemed to stop completely. Sunny blinked, his brain trying in vain to interpret why or how he was looking at this.

The piece of paper had colors on the other side that Sunny had not noticed until he had picked it up. This wasn't actually a piece of paper. It was a polaroid photograph. A photograph he had seen several times before.

Sunny immediately felt like he was going to throw up. What he was seeing didn't make sense. It didn't make sense that this image would just be sitting here all alone.

The image itself was not scary. It was just a photo of a stupid kid who was going to ruin his friend's lives and kill his sister.

It was just an ugly, worthless photo of Sunny's least-favorite person.

The boy in this image could have been spending time with the five people in his life that he was soon to lose forever, but instead he was absentmindedly playing a handheld video game while laying sideways on the couch. Stupid piece of shit.

It's your best friend's birthday today, and you're playing video games on the couch by yourself. *Fuck you.*

Alone, this image meant absolutely nothing. But finding it had sent Sunny's mind spiraling.

Basil was the one who was last in possession of the photo album. Sunny knew that for a fact, because he was the one who gave it back to him. Sunny remembered that event like it was yesterday, because the conversation had been so painful for him.

He brought the photo album over to Basil's room while they were hospitalized together.

Sunny had wanted to give back the album as a promise that he wouldn't be gone forever. He was going to have to move away after they left the hospital, and he wanted Basil to remember all the good things they had felt together. He wanted Basil to once more keep those memories close in his absence, even if asking that of him was terribly selfish. Basil had insisted he keep at least one of the photos. Sunny agreed, saying that he would hold on to one for Basil and give it back to him when he returned. After his promise, Basil had then become oddly silent, as if his mind was somewhat disquieted by what Sunny had said.

Sunny's friend suggested that he take the image of him, his sister, and his three friends relaxing in the treehouse. It was arguably the most calming group photo they had, but Basil wasn't in it. Sunny decided that he also wanted a picture of Basil, and asked if he could take the image of the blonde reading a story to him when they were younger: *an image Mari herself had taken.*

Sunny wished they had a single photo of just Basil by himself, but this one was still good, even if Sunny was in it too... *even if looking at it for too long hurt him deeply.*

For some reason, Basil seemed strangely reluctant, as if he didn't want Sunny to keep a photo of him, but he eventually relented.

---

Sunny frowned. He had no idea where those photos he had taken with him were now. They were probably gone forever, those precious images forever lost. One more piece of Mari and his friends that he would never see again.

Sunny shook his head in frustration. *FOCUS.*

What was important right now is that the photo Sunny had found in the truck was something that Basil had in his possession, and that it had been left in the front seat of the vehicle.

*That alone meant absolutely nothing, proved absolutely nothing, but it raised some horrifying concerns in the back of Sunny's head.*

At some point, either Basil or someone else who had gained possession of this photo had been in the driver or passenger's seat of the vehicle. The photo album was nowhere to be found, but this one image remained.

Either this image had been dropped, had fallen out of Basil's album, or had been left behind intentionally. If Basil knew that this photograph was sitting by itself in the front of the truck, then he would use it as ammunition to blame himself. He had already started doing so despite there having been no meaningful evidence of the possibility.

*Sunny needed to think hard. He still felt like he had forgotten something important, but there was no use cursing himself over it. He needed to sort himself out. He needed to narrow things down.*

Sunny had been thus far trying to focus on the two of them simply staying alive and getting home, but he had also been using the constant worries created by this dangerous situation they were in as an excuse to avoid confronting unpleasant ideas of how they had ended up here in the first place.

He was running again. Trying to escape from things he just didn't want to think about because his thoughts scared him.

*Focus.*

The first question struck him as the most important:

*How had they both **forgotten** how they arrived?* For Sunny, that didn't seem exactly out of line. He had certainly suppressed worse memories than having been packed into a delivery truck. If the situation regarding their arrival was something particularly horrible, Sunny could have possibly restrained the memory.

But what about Basil? Basil might not have been in the best headspace recently, but he never mentioned anything to Sunny regarding wild bouts of extreme amnesia. Sunny had suffered recent head injuries, but to his knowledge, the same could not be said about Basil.

*Focus. Ignore that for now. What conclusions can be reached from the actually-existing evidence Sunny had at his disposal?*

Sunny considered the possibilities. He could think of four primary explanations regarding the pair's waking experience in the truck, but none of them were good.

**Number One.** The hospital staff had, for whatever reason, sent the two of them away to this place, possibly by mistake. Maybe there was something dangerous happening at the hospital, and they had to be moved away using some form of improvisation, which is why they had been stuffed in the back of a non-emergency truck.

**Number Two.** Someone had taken him and Basil to this building, and then left them alone for some unknown reason. A kidnapping had occurred, but the perpetrator vanished into thin air.

**Number Three.** Sunny and Basil had escaped the hospital and hitchhiked in the back of someone's delivery truck, arriving at this random location.

**Number Four.** Either Sunny or Basil had stolen the vehicle and drove themselves out here on purpose, as to avoid someone or something. Their friends, Sunny moving away, etc.

**Option One.** If the hospital had sent them here, where had the driver gone? What could possibly have happened that would have forced them to move Sunny and Basil in a vehicle like this? Why would they have been sent to an interior design business of all places? Why would Sunny and Basil have been sent off with only each other after the nursing staff had been so clear that they now needed to stay separated?

**Option Two.** If someone had kidnapped them, then the abductor's disappearance was extremely strange. Why steal a couple of teenagers if you were going to just leave them in the middle of nowhere? How the hell could someone have taken the two of them out of a fully-staffed public hospital? Was it some kind of organized kidnapping? If they had been abducted, why wouldn't the two of them have been tied up or restrained when they awoke?

**Option Three.** If they hitchhiked, then where did the driver go? Was there some kind of accident? Was the driver delivering furniture to this place? There was no furniture in the back of the truck, only dirty mattresses and blankets. Anyone unloading the back of the truck would have definitely seen them and known that they were there. Sunny had seen movers on TV wrap and tie old blankets around furniture items to prevent them from rubbing up against each other during transit... that didn't exactly explain the mattresses, though. *Were the mattresses part of the delivery? They seemed old…*

**Option Four.** Was it even possible for either of them to have driven the other out here?

The horrified teen took a deep breath and steeled himself. *Maybe Basil was right. Maybe this really was hell.*

**It could not have been Sunny.** Sunny could not see. His depth perception was absolute garbage, especially when they first arrived, so there's no way he could have driven the vehicle. Even if he could somehow steal a truck, even if he knew how to drive, he would have smashed them into trees constantly and repeatedly. The vehicle would have been totaled a total of one-hundred times, minimum.

*That only left Basil.*

Sunny's hands nervously twitched. He clawed at the side of his neck. That still didn't make sense, for too many reasons to even bother counting them. There had to be something else. Anything.

**Focus!**

**Option Five.** Combination of possibility Three and Four. Maybe Sunny and Basil had began hitchhiking, and then at some point one of the two of them had stolen control of the vehicle from its original owner and drove themselves out here to somewhere nobody would find them. *Why? Unimportant right now.*

That reopened the possibility that Sunny could have **maybe** been the one who had taken them here. Did Sunny know how to drive? **No.** Could Sunny have driven a giant truck that big for any meaningful distance? **Probably not.** Could he have stolen a truck and driven it a very small distance away from its intended destination? *Maybe?* That **could** be possible… Would whoever owned the vehicle really not have been able to track them down by now?

*Could… another part of Sunny have done it?*

Sunny was used to handing over control of himself to a piece of his mind that he did not totally understand. A part he didn't always have total control over. Something unsettling that he used to protect himself. A carefully-crafted shell that had allowed Sunny to disappear into his own subconscious for four long years.

As Omori, could he have done it? Omori wasn't really a different person from Sunny, but a part of him. Sunny had lost control of himself to Omori before, but that was just in a dream...

…and Sunny had only ever *'become'* him in his dreams. He had never lost control like that while awake. It also wasn't as if he had no memories of having faded into Omori, those details had just become a little bit fuzzier ever since Sunny had stopped sleeping for over twenty hours a day. If Sunny had completely dissociated from himself and *DRIVEN A HUGE TRUCK INTO THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE*, he was fairly confident he would remember at least *part* of it.

If a sixteen year-old Sunny didn't know how to drive a delivery vehicle, a twelve year-old figment of Sunny's mind definitely couldn't either, right?

Was driving a truck hard? Or was it something that you could get the hang of in a day or two?

*Sunny felt himself starting to panic again. His options were steadily shrinking.*

Sunny swallowed. Maybe he was just trying to cover for Basil by convincing himself this situation was his own fault.

*He had that photo. Basil was the one who had it. It was right next to the driver's seat.*

Could Basil really have known all along where they were and just lied? *Why? For what reason?*

Basil. *Basil Basil Basil.*

*Fuck.* ***FUCK!***

Basil didn't lie to him. Basil had always been open to him about everything…

*Almost everything*.

*Lines.* Lines on Basil's wrists. Injury on his stomach. Something he kept hiding.

...

*Basil had tried to kill him once before.*

Sunny quietly growled in frustration, trying to release the tension in his head without making too much noise. He subconsciously lifted his arm and held a shaky hand over his missing eye, exhaling through his teeth. He stifled back a panicked scream.

*Sunny wracked his brain, attempting to recall every detail he knew about Basil. Every significant moment they had ever shared together.*

*Every smile, every laugh, every sob.*

*He thought about how many quiet days he had shared with Basil, and even more loud ones amongst their friends. He thought about the stories Basil read him, the flowers Basil showed him, and the struggles Basil shared with him.*

*He thought about how Basil had acted the night they fought. He thought about how many times he apologized to Sunny for hurting him.*

*He thought about hugging Basil. Basil reading him a book. He thought about Basil comforting him when he cried.*

*Basil smiled and Sunny smiled back. They laughed and cried and screamed and bled.*

*The two of them walked up that staircase, and they walked back down again. They had done things together that neither would ever escape from.*

All of that was real. None of that was just a dream. *Sunny* ***knew*** *Basil.*

Basil wasn't some kind of master liar. He was a terrible liar. An awful, hopeless liar who always tried to put a reassuring smile on his own face even when he shouldn't. If Basil had

taken the two of them out here, then he definitely didn’t know it himself.

How was Basil feeling right now? Did Sunny even have the time to be freaking out about this? Did Mari's death and Sunny's absence warp Basil's mind more terribly than he had thought? Would he? Could Basil really dissociate from himself to the extent that he could bring them out here?

*Memories rushed into Sunny's mind, scrambling and squirming and folding over one another.*

*"W-Why... are you staring at me like that?"*

*"It's already been four years, hasn't it?"*

*"H-How are you doing, Sunny? Is everything okay with you?"*

*"Let's make some new memories together, okay?"*

*"Sunny... there's... no way out of this, is there?"*

*"Ah... you've finally come... I'm really sorry. It might be too late for me, but please try to save me ok?"*

***"Promise you will, Sunny?"***

*BasilBasilBasilBasilBasilBasilBasilBasilBasilBasilBasilBasilBasilBasilBasilBasilBasil*
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Sunny threw up. He vomited into the sink and pulled at his hair in frustration. The little stomach contents he had left, mockingly sliding down the drain.

*Calm down.* None of these thoughts proved anything. Maybe Basil was the only one of the two of them that could have driven a vehicle out here, but that didn't mean that's what actually happened. That was just the worst-case scenario of a **single** potential explanation of what had lead them here. An unlikely instance of an unlikely concept. Sunny kept trying to calm himself.

But despite all this panic, all this confused second-guessing, this pounding and buzzing and flailing around inside his head…

**Sunny came to a conclusion that he had not consciously acknowledged before.** A feeling within him began to take shape. Something important started to solidify inside his mind, a truth that would determine his actions moving forward.

*Sunny cared about Basil. He cared about Basil in a way he didn't think was possible.*

Basil had been his best friend, but Sunny liked him more than that. When Basil wasn't around now, everything felt like a pointless waste of time. He didn't care about any of it. He just wanted to see that smile again. He couldn't stop staring at Basil no matter how hard he tried. Regardless of how insignificant, every single quiet word Basil spoke wormed its way inside him.

Sunny saw the weight Basil carried on his shoulders, and he was going to help him lift it, no matter what it took. Even if Basil himself didn't want Sunny to. If Basil was going to hurt him, then Sunny was fine with that. He wasn't going anywhere.

Even if Basil might be insane, even if Sunny might be the one losing his mind, he wouldn't turn his back on his best friend. Sunny wanted to trust Basil.

Sunny had turned away from Basil many times before. He had rejected him when Basil needed him more than ever, having been petrified by the weight of his own guilt. Basil wept alone in the bathroom, abandoned once more by a boy who stopped at his house after four long years, only to announce a permanent exit from his life.

**Sunny would never make that mistake again.**

*He looked back towards the door.*

# For Her

He pulled open the door to Aubrey's room. To Hero's surprise, his brother was already inside. Kel sat beside Aubrey's bed, his back hunched over. If they had been speaking at all before Hero appeared, they certainly weren't anymore. Aubrey quickly glanced at the doorway as he entered, before promptly turning her head towards the window in something that might've been shame... or maybe anger. She wouldn't look at him.

Aubrey's hair was unkempt, which was unusual for her. Her right arm was covered in a white bandage.

Hero walked towards the two of them before speaking.

"Hey, Aubrey... how are you feeling?"

*"How am I feeling?"* She repeated the question back to him.

Hero sighed and took the next empty seat near the bed. The three of them sat in silence, a clock on the wall ticking along slowly and quietly as if to accentuate their misery. Hero gazed out the window. What should have been a sunny summer day was blanketed in yet another layer of thick clouds. The bulb in the hospital room had been left off in favor of letting in natural light, but despite being the middle of the afternoon, it still remained quite dull and grey. The trio listened to cars driving back and forth in the distance, the sounds of traffic occasionally being drowned out by the angry wind. Kel raised his arm and scratched the back of his head. Hero spoke.

*"Aubrey, I know that we've-"*

"I'm not going to do it again." Aubrey cut him off. "I wasn't even trying to... *I just didn't cut it right."* "It was an accident." Aubrey said.

"If you're just here to make sure I'm okay, thank you. I am." She insisted.

"I'll be fine. You can both go now."

*Nobody in the room moved an inch.*

Aubrey exhaled and wiped her eyes on the back of her hand. Kel handed her a tissue, which the girl silently accepted. She let out a quiet sniffle.

Hero rested his face in his hands. Kel still had not spoken a word.

After another minute past in silence, Aubrey finally spoke again.

"Are the three of us just... *cursed?"* She asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Aubrey, No." Hero reassured her. "We're just... *we..."*

Hero trailed off, finding himself seemingly incapable of creating any semblance of reassurance for his friends.

"I just wish... I would have said something, before they were gone." Aubrey stated, staring out the window. "I don't know what it would have been... just... *something.*"

Hero and his brother continued to sit in silence.

"I wonder what she would have done. If she was in our place..." Aubrey pondered aloud, her voice sounding very far away.

Hero gently scratched the side of his face. Someone had left the windows open a crack. A sudden blast of wind blew violently outside, but by the time it had squeezed into the room it was a soft gust. The sheets at the end of Aubrey's bed ruffled back and forth.

"I... I visited Sunny and Basil a couple times... before they were gone." Hero's brother suddenly spoke.

Hero and Aubrey turned their heads towards Kel, both seemingly surprised by what he had claimed.

"You did?" Aubrey asked.

"Yeah."

Aubrey hesitated for a moment.

*"...How were they?"*

Kel stared out the window. "They seemed... good? Happy, even? *Relieved,* maybe?"

Kel's friends stared at him. To Hero's knowledge, neither Kel or Aubrey had seen Sunny or Basil a single time after Sunny had revealed their terrible secret.

Hero had wanted to come back at least once, if only to reaffirm with Basil that Sunny's story was true, but he could barely bring himself to. The thought of it made him feel like he might not be able to sit through the conversation either way. He ended up visiting for a few minutes... but never did speak to Basil.

"I... they just seemed alive again, I guess? In a way that the two of them weren't before." Kel continued.

Aubrey opened her mouth for a brief second as if to speak, but closed it again, watching to see if Kel would continue.

"I just can't imagine that... looking the way they were... that the two of them would want to... *y'know?"*

"I just don't think that's why they would have left." Kel continued.

Hero felt his hands slowly ball into fists.

"Kel. *Why didn't you mention any of this earlier?"* He asked.

Kel side-eyed him. "I was working through my own stuff. And I tried to talk to the **both** of you, and neither of you would speak to me." He said, turning his head back and forth between the two of them.

Hero quietly exhaled through his nose. "Couldn't you at **least** have told Aubrey that? Slipped a note under her door? You kept this from us, even after they vanished?"

*"Yeah. I guess I did."* Kel stared at him.

"Aubrey could have really hurt herself." Hero couldn't help but glare at his brother, even though it wasn't fair for him to.

"How was I supposed to know this was going to happen? *She doesn't tell me anything!"* Kel exclaimed.

"I don't have to tell anyone anything I don't want to. Is this why you guys came? To argue in my room?" Aubrey scowled at them both. Kel and his brother quieted down. That anger left her face quickly. She just looked hollow.

"Sorry." Hero apologized. Kel turned his head back to the ground.

The room returned to its previous silence.

"I'm sorry, Kel. That wasn't fair of me. I should have spoken to you earlier. *I'm sorry."* Hero apologized to his sibling.

Kel smirked. *"Don't worry about it, bro."*

Another minute passed by wordlessly. The clock continued its quiet march.

"I'm sorry too." Aubrey apologized. "I should have... said something. Before I ended up in here."

The brothers stayed silent.

"It's almost funny. We said that we were going to be there for each other, and now we're... *like this."*

She faked a bitter chuckle. "I said all that stuff about pushing everyone away... and I did it all over again."

"Aubrey... we're all struggling through this. We're just..." Hero once again failed to find any words. Aubrey stared at him with tears in her eyes.

Hero never managed to finish. The room returned to a quiet, shared misery. Aubrey turned back to the window.

Hero thought how he had felt when he was wandering around town looking for Sunny and his brother. He had been horrified to find that two of his old friends had fallen into the lake, but it seemed as if everything was going to work out in the end. Hero wasn't sure how he would feel speaking to Sunny again after so many years, or if he would even have the strength to give the younger boy a single kind word or reassuring smile, but pulling Sunny out of the water had filled him with a sense of nostalgia for someone he'd lost, and that brief comfort recomposed Hero to some extent. Sunny was gaunt, somber, and quiet, but he still looked just like her. It wasn't as if the two of them were always the closest amongst their group of friends, but Sunny and Hero always shared a kind of unspoken understanding. They were both consumed by a powerful affection for his sister, and her gently-worried tendency to watch over Sunny had rubbed off on Hero. He was the youngest brother Hero had, and the two of them had been apart for too long. Sunny had been apart from **everyone** for too long.

He thought back to their first introduction, years prior. Hero had, in all honesty, been a little creeped out by Mari's little brother when they had first met. He was very quiet, rather shy, and mostly kept to himself. At first, the way the boy stared at him unnerved Hero somewhat, but he grew to find it rather endearing. Sunny's eyes contained no judgement or malice, only a wordless curiosity about him and Kel. He was nothing like Hero's own brother, *but that was very often a good thing.* Sunny seemed to take a liking to Hero as well. The two of them spoke sometimes, but Kel largely kept Sunny busy. Hero was glad that his brother had finally found someone who had more than enough tolerance to keep up with his... *vibrant* antics. It was nice to see Sunny smile, and it was nice to see Kel smile, too.

It might have occasionally just all been inside Hero's head, but it sometimes seemed as if Sunny would subtly and silently nudge him into situations where he would need to interact with the boy's sister. Sunny would sneakily manufacture pointless problems that Hero and Mari (as the 'adults' in the room) would have to be the ones to fix.

*Hero figured that must have meant Sunny liked having him around? He had a strange little wingman.*

But if Hero overstepped his bounds, Sunny would put him in his place. When **Sunny** was the one hanging out with his sister, Hero could take the backseat. *Only so much Mari to go around, it seemed.*

Hero felt Sunny was kinder than people typically saw, but he was quite reserved. Even when the four of them had found Aubrey crying on the sidewalk that day, Sunny had been the only one who kept his hands to himself. Maybe that was because he didn't want to get involved, but Hero interpreted it as a sign of humble solidarity. Sunny was a young gentleman.

All of those good memories of her younger brother felt tainted now. *Poisoned. Was Sunny still like that? Had Sunny ever been like that? Were him and Basil even people worth giving any attention to?*

Basil...

*Hero didn't consciously recognize it at the time, but out of everyone else in the group, Basil reminded him of Mari the most.* They were both kind to a fault, cared deeply about their friends, and seemed to near-constantly wear reassuring smiles on their faces... *whether those*

*smiles were real or not.* The pair seemed to share something in common that was rooted deep within them, but Hero wasn't exactly sure what. They both had a tendency to hide their more-unpleasant emotions, but Basil was far less gifted at doing so than Mari. *Hero thought that was probably for the best.*

Once she was gone... those tendencies seemed to have infected him and his brother as well. Mari and Basil had just been ahead of the curve. Aubrey had locked out her friends. Sunny had locked out **everything**.

*If Hero had gotten Basil to open up more when they were kids, would anything have ended up differently? Would he have still done what he did?*

Basil often only seemed to open up to Sunny (and sometimes Aubrey), but on occasion, Hero would come back to grab a still-uneaten chocolate chip cookie and find that everyone else had left the picnic blanket, Mari and Basil then alone together, the pair engaged in quiet conversation. Basil would blush and nervously stutter something with a smile on his face and Mari would laugh in response. Hero would do anything to hear that laugh one more time.

Hero had asked Mari if Basil ever opened up about himself to her, and she confirmed that he did, although she would never give him any specifics. Mari would not reveal anything about her friends that she had not been explicitly given the right to do so. Hero liked that about her, even though he hated being kept out of the loop. He would always ask about their younger friends and Mari would chastise him...

*"**Hero!** How would you feel if I went and spoke all the secrets you've shared with me to someone else? Would you want me to tell Kel all the embarrassing things I know about his older brother? That isn't very thoughtful of you, hehe..."*

Hero felt a sad smile creep onto his face. *I miss you, Mari.*

Her and Basil had a tendency to end up alone together, even if it seemed to just be by chance. Aubrey would be angrily chasing down Kel over something insensitive he had said, and Hero would have no choice but to leave Mari and make sure the two of them didn't get lost in the woods while needlessly prolonging their ridiculous battles. Hero wasn't always sure where Sunny ended up, but if it wasn't wrapped up as an innocent bystander in the middle of Kel and Aubrey's argument, it was often under a shaded tree in sweet slumber. *Hero hoped that he only slept so much because his body was growing.*

Whereas Hero felt as if he could reach Sunny, Basil seemed a bit farther from his grasp. For a long time, he was never quite sure what to make of him.

*What was Basil really like?* He was quiet but passionate... loved living things and captured them in a way it often seemed only he could. Aubrey would insist he wear a flower in his hair and he did so willingly and gladly. The other people in town seemed to find him odd, but that peculiarity faded quickly from Hero's mind. He may have been the last to join them, but Basil was a member of the group. Things had begun to feel strange whenever he was absent. *Should Hero have told him that? Should he have told Basil how much the others thought of him?*

Mari silently worried about everyone, but she seemed to worry over her brother and Basil the most. She would occasionally speak of it to Hero, but he was never entirely sure where her worries grew from.

It was to the couple's great comfort to then find that Sunny and Basil had found something within each other that they seemingly could not get from the rest of their friends. The two became a matching pair, and they both smiled more often and wider than Hero had seen before. Mari's brother stopped hiding behind her quite as much. Sunny began to speak his mind a bit more frequently, and Basil would joyfully read to him aloud, the flower boy's constant stutter and nervous smile disappearing as he played out the voices of dramatic characters to his friend's amusement. Hero would sometimes listen in to Basil's stories, but tried to do so unnoticed. He didn't want to interrupt the magic. *Basil often struggled in front of an audience.*

*Why was Basil always so awkward?* Sure, he was shy... but not in the same way Sunny tended to be. Sunny was quiet because that's just the way he was, but Basil could actually become rather talkative. Hero saw how he would change around Mari and her brother.

Basil wasn't constantly biting his own tongue because he wanted to, but rather because he, *for whatever reason,* seemed to feel as though he **had** to. That restraint slowly melted away from him over time, but it never completely left his soft voice, or his shrunken posture.

*What did Basil always seem so ashamed about? Was it just the fact that he stuttered often? Hero didn't mind, and he seriously doubted anyone else did... Mari said she thought Basil's voice was really cute.*

When the rest of the gang agreed that the flower crown fit him really well, Hero did not expect him to continue wearing floral detailing in his hair. It wasn't as if anything about that seemed unusual to Hero, he knew Basil after all, but he also knew that to the people who lived in this town, something like that might get him into trouble.

But yet Basil continued wearing the flower clip unabated. It was now a part of himself he stubbornly refused to let go of, no matter how other people outside their group looked at him. *Hero liked that.* Even Basil had to put his foot down sometimes.

Sunny would follow him in solidarity, occasionally placing the plants in his own shadowy locks. A matching pair.

Their reservations seemed to slowly crumble away. The pair became a little more like Kel and Aubrey, and as the group grew closer, Kel and Aubrey became a little more like them. Mari had slowly placed Hero into a second family, seemingly without him even noticing. *Those were all good days.* Painfully so. Hero wondered if any future days would ever match them.

*Hero and Mari, Kel and Aubrey, Sunny and Basil... Mewo. Hector.*

**It just didn't make sense.**

"I think Kel's right." Hero spoke. The two turned their heads to look at him.

"I don't think Sunny and Basil are gone. I think they're still out there somewhere."

"Why do you say that, Hero?" Aubrey quietly asked him.

"I found one of Basil's old photos. Of Mari. I found it near our old hangout spot." Hero said. "I thought it might be... *a message, maybe."*

"If Kel says the two of them seemed happy after the truth came out, then I don't think they went off to hurt themselves." Hero continued.

"So... where would they go?" Kel inquired.

"I... *I don't know."* His brother admitted.

"But I don't want to sit here and just... not do anything. I don't want to just sit by and watch things end again. There's no way I could live with that." Hero said, glaring into the barely-visible sheen of his wobbly reflection in the tile floor. "Even if its already hopeless, I can't just stand around and dream that things are going to change."

"So what is it you want to do?" Aubrey asked.

"I feel like... we should check places that we've been before. Places that were important to the six of us. To her."

"We?"

"Maybe we could find them? Maybe they would have left something behind..." Hero trailed off.

"Basil and Sunny don't particularly strike me as the most travelled, I think that if they went anywhere, it would be somewhere they'd have been before." He claimed.

"Do you actually think that if they were any signs of Sunny and Basil in places like those that the police wouldn't have already found them?" Aubrey inquired.

"The police around here would rather spend their time chasing homeless people. I don't really trust them to do anything. Besides, do you two of you really just want to sit here and do nothing?" He asked.

The room turned silent.

*"...No."* Kel spoke. "I don't."

The two of them looked at Aubrey. Her pink hair fell in locks in front of her face.

"*Aubrey.* I want to find them, but not *for* them. I want us to do it for us. For her. *For Mari."* Hero held out his hand towards his friend.

Aubrey wiped her eyes on her arm. She placed her hand down on top of Hero's. "For Mari." She mumbled.

Kel let out his first goofy smile in a long time and slapped his hand down on the others.

"So... are we going to be going to the beach, then?" Hero's brother asked, smirking.

"That was on my list." Hero admitted.

"Where are you going to get a car?" Kel said. "Do you really think mom and dad are going to let you take ours on a trip like this?"

*"Uhh..."* Hero glanced to the side, feeling sweat start to build on his forehead.

Aubrey appeared as if she was thinking to herself for a moment before she spoke again.

*"I think... I might be able to help with that."*

# Painkiller

Having finally steeled himself, Sunny returned the image to his pocket and turned to face the door. He was ready.

*Or so he thought*. As he held his hand out towards the knob, he felt himself gripped by a sudden wave of suspense. Something about the way Basil was behaving before he left the room had unsettled him. *His friend was clearly concealing something, but what?*

*He knew that getting caught was going to be incredibly awkward, but Sunny couldn't help himself.* Instead of swinging the door open and stepping out into the bedroom normally, the curious teen twisted the knob with an almost ghostlike hesitation, such that it hopefully wouldn't make a sound. Sunny opened the door only far enough that he could peek out a crack, and searched for Basil's reflection in the darkened television on the other side of the room.

Basil was visible, fixing the bed somewhat so that it wasn't such a wrinkled mess. Sunny watched as he stepped back over to the side table, and picked up whatever it was he had hidden before. The boy squinted at his friend's reflection. *It was just the liquid painkiller.*

Sunny felt a sudden wave of relief. **That**'s what had been on the floor, what Basil had been so desperate to hide. He was just embarrassed over their awkward medicinal transaction earlier, and was trying to conceal it. Basil must've wanted to take some of the painkiller himself, but was now too embarrassed to do so in Sunny's presence. *Nothing scary, just Basil being Basil.*

Basil twisted the top off of the drug.

Sunny couldn't hear him, but he noticed something unusual about the way Basil was moving. He was breathing quite heavily, seemingly… *nervous, maybe?* Sunny felt his face grow so hot it might burst into flames as he watched Basil slowly and carefully pour some of the medication onto the spoon they now shared. To Sunny's squirming discomfort, Basil seemed to hesitate for a moment before he let the utensil past his lips.

Sunny felt **extremely** guilty watching this scene without Basil knowing. *Why hasn't Sunny opened the door yet? Wait until he's done…*

Sunny expected the worst of the embarrassment to conclude quickly, but the spoon was lingering within Basil's mouth for far longer than it naturally should have. Basil had a really strange expression on his face now. Sunny felt chills run down his spine.

Sunny's heartbeat increased rapidly, and he considered stepping back from the door, but continued watching Basil's reflection anyway. He was petrified in place. To Sunny's relief, the spoon finally left Basil's mouth. That really wasn't that long. Sunny was just embarrassing his own mind by overthinking everything.

Basil held out the spoon once more, and to Sunny's concern, began to pour out a second hit for himself.

Sunny worried. *Wasn't that too much?* This stuff was for grown adults, and Basil was a somewhat small teenager. Was Basil in that much pain right now? Sunny felt a little nauseous watching this.

*It wasn't that big a deal,* he considered. This was an over-the-counter painkiller we were talking about right now, not some kind of opioid.

His eyebrow twitched as Basil inserted the spoon into his mouth and swallowed its contents once again. Poor Basil. That stuff tasted really gross.

Basil's breathing was even heavier now. He must be in a lot of suffering…

**Sunny needs to stop watching now. He doesn't. What he sees next makes his stomach turn.**

The bottle is tilted a third time.

*Basil, that's too much.*

The spoon is refilled again.

*Basil, that's **too much.***

Basil had been feeling sick. Sunny had not seen him eat once since he had thrown up earlier. Even if it was safe to take that much of the medication, it definitely wasn't on an empty stomach. Basil swallowed his third spoonful.

*To Sunny's absolute horror,* it seriously looked as if Basil was preparing to pour out a FOURTH dose of the liquid painkiller before stopping himself. He stood with the spoon in his hand for a moment, before setting both of the items down and starting to twist the cap back onto the drug.

*Sunny accidentally (and audibly) exhaled in relief, and Basil's head turned to the bathroom door. Sunny stepped back immediately.*

There's no way he could have seen him from that angle. Sunny had been watching his reflection. *Calm down. Relax.*

The black-haired spy heard footsteps in the other room. Basil was moving to the other side of the bed, towards the bathroom door.

Sunny quickly turned himself back to the mirror and removed his decorative eyepatch, pretending as if he was reapplying the already-existing bandage to his face by running across the cloth with his fingers.

*"S-Sunny? Are you okay in there?"* Basil knocked on the doorframe.

Sunny turned to face him in the doorway, feigning surprise as Basil gently pushed the door open. Basil took a step back when Sunny turned to face him.

His friend’s face was very heavily flushed. Basil is smiling, but there's something kind of odd about his expression. Sunny can’t tell if it’s forced or not. He looks embarrassed.

“S-Sorry for the intrusion!” He apologized. “I just, uh… *how are you doing in here?*”

*Terrible.*

“I-I’m good. It doesn’t look like it’s swollen or infected or anything…” Sunny provided Basil his fabricated reassurance. *Fuck.* He should have at least looked at the eye to make sure that was true. He lied about it to get some space, but he **did** need to check on his injury once in a while…

“N-No new bandage?” Basil asked, tilting his head slightly. “D-Don’t you think you should put on a new bandage instead of reapplying that one?”

“It’s fine.” Sunny spoke. “This one hasn’t been on for very long.”

“But it’s not even a real eye bandage…” Basil complained.

“Well, look on the bright side…” Sunny started, picking up the eyepatch and strapping it back over his injury. “Now I have **two** layers of protection from the outside world.” Basil rolled his eyes but smirked slightly in response.

There was a brief moment of silence. Sunny hesitated. He wanted to spend just one more second in this peaceful period of casual conversation before destroying it. The chilled wind howled against the bedroom window.

"...Basil."

“Mm?”

"I have to tell you something."

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For a second, the blonde seemed somewhat taken aback by Sunny’s sudden change in demeanor. Sunny knew the other boy could tell that his friend was about to tell him something serious.

“Oh… Okay, Sunny. Y-You can tell me anything!” Basil reassured him.

Sunny opened his mouth and briefly hesitated, before his stomach suddenly made an unprompted cry for help.

“Actually… *can we eat something first?*” He suggested. Basil smiled and nodded.

The two of them returned to the bed and snuck under the blankets in their respective positions, trying to protect themselves from the chilled air in the display room. Sunny missed the fire already. He tried to ignore the aching in his skull, and tried to stop feeling guilty over failing to inspect his ocular injury while he had the chance.

The pair were both eating bags of mini pretzels, which were some of the few remaining vending gifts they had left. Sunny was drinking a peach soda, while Basil drank a full water bottle that he had refilled from the tap. Sunny was glad to see that Basil was willing to eat, although he had a somewhat discomforted look on his face while he chewed.

Sunny glanced out the display room window and into the inky blackness. Nighttime once more. The wind was loud. Assuming they had the worst possible luck, and they had arrived to this building on a Friday evening, it was now Sunday night. Tomorrow was Monday. Someone would definitely be coming back in to work tomorrow, and would find Sunny and Basil hiding here in need of assistance.

*Someone was going to show up soon. They had to.*

*"So what was it that you wanted to tell me, Sunny?"* Basil curiously inquired.

Sunny hesitated. In an instant, a dozen different ways in which he predicted this conversation could go all rushed through his mind at once. He couldn't help but flash back to the last time he revealed something he had been hiding from his friends, and immediately felt a wave of indescribable nausea... *but this was different. This would end up okay.*

*"When we were back outside, while you were picking up that branch... I looked in the cabin of the truck and I found something."*

"Y-You found something? What?"

Sunny swallowed, and reached back into his pocket. He pulled out the image of himself from under the covers and handed it to Basil, who began to view it under the beam of his flashlight. Sunny's friend looked at it with a neutral face for a moment, before his expression quickly twisted into one of complete shock.

"H-Huh? *T-T-This was in the t-truck?"* Basil asked, stuttering heavily.

*"Yeah*… it was on the floor next to the drivers seat. The photo album wasn't in there, it was just this one image." Sunny replied.

The wind continued screeching outside. Basil looked like he was about to ask another question, but his expression quickly turned to one of cold horror as the wheels spun in his mind.

*"**Basil.**"* Sunny spoke calmly. *"It wasn't you."*

"I… *Y-You don't know that…"* Basil argued, growing increasingly agitated. The blonde's hands shook rapidly. His breathing picked up significantly.

“Even if we could somehow have gotten out of the hospital and you knew how to drive, there’s no way you would have stolen a truck and taken us out to some random furniture place in the middle of nowhere.” Sunny’s throat hurt from speaking so much. *“It wasn’t you.”* He reaffirmed.

“B-But…” Basil tried to object but he didn’t have any arguments. Even he had to admit that the idea sounded absolutely ridiculous.

The room returned to silence. “Alright… *but what does this mean, then?”* Basil asked.

“I… don’t really know.” Sunny admitted.

“Do you think the image is some kind of message?”

“If it was, why would it have been on the floor?” Sunny responded.

“S-Sunny, there’s nowhere else to go around here…” the blonde mumbled. “*D-Doesn’t whoever brought us here have to be in here with us?!*” He loudly whispered.

“Maybe they got in a different car and bailed?” Sunny suggested.

“If this really was a kidnapping, we would have been restrained. And if someone was still out here and wanted to hurt us, I think it would be… *pretty easy.*” Sunny admitted before reconsidering his choice of phrasing. Basil looked increasingly upset with every word he spoke.

“But we might have just hitchhiked!” Sunny suggested, trying to lighten the mood, even if only a little. He tried to fake a smile. *He was not good at it.*

*Basil paused for a moment before asking a question that made Sunny feel nauseous.*

“So when you said the hallucinations were the thing that was making you panic in the snowstorm, *that wasn’t true?“* Basil asked. Sunny swallowed. His mouth felt dry.

“It wasn’t the **whole** truth…” Sunny responded. “I might have made the hallucination sound a little scarier than it was…”

“But you **were** lying?” Basil requested confirmation.

*“Yes.”* Sunny replied, looking downwards ashamedly.

“Why didn’t you tell me a minute ago?”

“I… I was afraid to.” he admitted.

*“Why were you afraid...”* It was a question, but Basil mumbled it dejectedly it as if he already knew, lowering his head.

“I…” Sunny started, but couldn’t finish.

“It’s okay, Sunn-“

“**No it isn’t**.” Basil’s friend cut him off. The blonde paused for a moment.

“So if you were afraid to tell me before, why are you telling me now?” Basil asked him.

“Because I trust you.” Sunny confidently stated.

Basil barely even whispered his next statement, but Sunny still caught it.

*You shouldn’t.*

***“But I do.”*** Sunny persisted.

Basil finally looked back at him, and stared him directly in the face for a few seconds before nervously looking away again. *“Okay.”* He mumbled.

The room temporarily returned to silence once more before either of them resumed talking. The raging wind sang somber songs against the sides of the building, begging to be let inside.

“That reminds me…” Sunny spoke. “Did you see a red safety whistle anywhere around here? I pulled one out of the supply closet the night we arrived but then it just sort of vanished…” The boy asked, scratching his head.

“A *whistle?”* The blonde responded.

“O-Oh!” Basil reached over to his side table and pulled open a drawer, from which he pulled out the object in question. “I didn’t even know what this was when I picked it up, but I was in kind of a panic, haha…” The blonde faked a laugh. “It must have fallen out of your pocket when you, uh... when I was... *by the stairs*." He finished.

“Do you also have that army knife that was in my pocket earlier?” Sunny inquired. “I doubt it will be super useful for us but its nice to have.”

“Y-Yeah it’s in here! You left it in the bathroom...” Basil confirmed, removing the bladed multi-tool from the drawer and holding it in his hand. Sunny reached out, but Basil’s fingers curled somewhat defensively.

“So… *can I have it?”* The pirate inquired.

“I d-don’t think you should be carrying any sharp objects, S-Sunny…” Basil complained. “You’ve fallen over a few times and you said your depth perception is bad…”

“What if I give this back to you and you end up cutting your fingers off??” Basil asked, sounding genuinely concerned of the possibility.

Sunny glanced down at the microscopic utility knife Basil was holding. *You’ve got to be kidding. The only thing that tiny blade would be dangerous to is a stick of butter.*

“Basil, come on. You’ve been carrying around a much longer knife this entire time. *I demand fair treatment…*” The eyepatched boy proclaimed, reaching towards the item once more.

Basil withdrew his hand. “**N-No!!**” He objected. “W-What if I give this back to you and you’re holding it and you trip and you stab yourself in the eye and you-“

“Okay, FINE!” Sunny submitted, smirking slightly. *“You can be in charge of the knives…”*

Basil looked somewhat ashamed but he smiled genuinely nonetheless. The knife was inserted somewhere beneath the covers, presumably Basil’s pocket. The room returned to some semblance of quietude, the only sounds remaining in the air being those of salty pretzel consumption.

After some time had passed, Basil had started cleaning up some of the bags now strewn across the room, and Sunny stood up to help him. They wordlessly picked up empty bags and cans, straightening pillows and chairs together in tandem. This place had become kind of a mess between the two of them, so it was probably important to clean it up eventually.

*Sunny wished eventually could have been a little later, though.*

He didn't feel like standing up right now, and he knew that Basil wouldn't force him to... but he also couldn't bare just lying in bed doing nothing while Basil was tidying the room.

Sunny took a look at the edibles they had left at their disposal. Upon taking inventory of their current food supply, the results were looking very poor. Only a few bags of chips remained.

*Or so it had seemed,* but after picking up one of the chip bags that had been left on the floor, Sunny found a singular bag of gummy bears that had been unintentionally hidden beneath it. *Score.*

“Basil do you want any gummy bears?” Sunny inquired, smirking to himself.

“We have those? Uh… no thank you, Sunny. *Go crazy.”* Basil encouraged.

Sunny inserted a small handful of ursine gelatins into his mouth and chewed them with careful consideration.

While consuming his prize, Sunny took a moment to appreciate that revealing what he found in the truck to Basil had not gone as terribly as he was worried it might. He had just been too paranoid.

For a moment, things were almost starting to look up. But then the boy glanced back at their remaining food supply and stopped chewing. *Maybe Sunny would save the rest of these for later.*

The two of them spent a bit more time in bed after the room had been returned to some semblance of order. Basil had tried to use hand soap and toilet paper to remove the purple stain on the carpet that he had made upon spilling some of the liquid medication, but it yielded no real results. Sunny wondered why he even bothered with the attempt.

Sunny considered asking Basil what he thought everyone else was currently thinking about regarding their disappearance but he once more decided against it. There were likely no pleasant responses to be given no matter how positive they could force themselves to be. Sunny quietly wondered if his mom was okay right now. He wondered if she called her ex-husband and cried to him about how their son had lost an eye and then vanished into thin air. Sunny wondered if his dad would even care. *Maybe he wouldn't even take the call.*

His thoughts drifted. Sunny wondered about Basil's parents. Did Basil's parents even know he was missing? Did they even care? *Had Basil's parents visited him when his grandmother was dying? Would they even bother?*

Basil never spoke about his family. When the two of them were younger that seemed *somewhat* strange to Sunny, but as the boy aged he only wondered more and more about what his friend's extended home looked like.

What kind of people were Basil's parents? Were they the kind of people who would buy furniture at a place like this? Were they never around because they were rich? Was it just because of their jobs? Were they… *activists* or something?

Basil at least had Polly, didn't he? Polly seemed to care a lot about him...

Sunny's friend went to the hospital by himself…

*Was Basil in the room when his grandmother died?*

…

Those gummy bears weren't sitting very well any more. He laid back down on the bed. Sunny shoved his head back into his pillow and tried not to think so much. *He was not good at it.*

*The wind outside was loud. That sound made Sunny tired.*

The black haired teen was feeling himself starting to drift off when Basil finally spoke.

"I was thinking of going back to the dining hall and grabbing the remaining hotdogs… did you want to come with?" The blonde asked him.

Sunny flashed back to the taste and texture of the carrot-based GMO-free hotdog replicas him and Basil had eaten earlier. Then he flashed back to watching Basil vomit the remains of those hotdogs onto the stairway.

Sunny had no desire to see those orange food tubes ever again. But he also had no intention of letting Basil go anywhere by himself, especially down that staircase.

“Yeah!” Sunny affirmed. “Let’s go.” The boy stood up.

“A-Are you sure? I actually think... maybe you should stay here…” Basil protested.

“No, I want to come with you." Sunny said. "I… don’t want to be left alone with my thoughts.” he stated.

A somber expression spread across Basil’s face. The blonde looked as if he might ask a question, but he held his tongue. Sunny walked around to the other side of the bed and offered Basil a hand to help him up. Basil took Sunny's hand as his cheeks reddened slightly.

The flower boy smiled at him weakly and the two walked hand-in-hand to the door, Basil leading. Sunny’s friend grasped the knob and twisted it open, stepping out into-

**The two of them froze in place.**

A strange yellow glow was emanating down the display room hallway.

*The lights in the lobby were on.*

# Sleep Later

The lights in the hallway were on.

Basil looked towards the hospital door. Even though it was the middle of the night, the lights in the hallway remained bright. Basil could occasionally hear the footsteps of busy medics on the night shift, darting from room to room, talking in quiet voices...

Basil tossed around in his hospital bed. He had been trying to fall asleep for hours, but his mind would not allow it. The lights were off, it was a cloudless night, and if he looked up through his hospital window, Basil could see the that the sky was full of stars.

Basil's thoughts buzzed around in his head like restless wasps. Ever since Sunny had come back, he had been having a lot of trouble staying focused, and even more trouble sleeping. All the subtle emotions in Basil's head that had long hidden in the background of his mind had now vigorously reasserted themselves. His skull was now constantly filled with sound, and although not all of that noise was unpleasant, the ceaseless ramblings made it very difficult to rest. Basil thought that getting Sunny back in his life would have made his constant, obsessive worries start to shrink away, but they only grew back stronger than ever.

*What was Sunny doing right now? Was he already asleep? Was he peeking at the stars like Basil? Was it weird to be wondering something like that?*

**There's no way he's asleep. He's probably in too much pain from the hole you put in his face. He's suffering right now and its your fault.**

Sunny had visited him in his room over and over, sneaking in no matter how many times the nurses forcibly escorted him out, but Basil had always stayed put. That hadn't yet changed... but the urge was starting to eat at Basil. He wanted to leave... *he wanted to go see his friend*.

*But what would he say? What reason would be possibly give for sneaking into Sunny's room?* There had to be something...

**Yes, go sneak into the hospital room of the boy who you just stabbed with gardening shears. Just pop in unannounced in the middle of the night, that's a brilliant idea. One eye not good enough for you?**

How would he justify visiting Sunny at a time like this? *Basil has been having terrible nightmares recently...* should he tell Sunny he couldn't sleep? Had Sunny been having nightmares too? If he had been having nightmares, would Sunny even want to share them with Basil? What if he sneaks into his room and Sunny is already asleep? Sunny needs his rest and Basil was just going to wake him up for no reason.

*Should he apologize more? He needs to apologize more... he hasn't apologized enough...*

**No. Stop apologizing. Is that seriously the only thing you know how to do? Do you have any idea how annoying you are? How many more times do you think Sunny will tolerate**

**listening to the same thing over and over? If you don't stop fucking this up he's going to leave again.**

*... Sunny is leaving no matter what I do.*

*Basil felt his heartbeat stutter. He should leave the room. He should go see Sunny right now. He wouldn't get many more nights like this.*

There's so many things he needs to tell him, so many more questions he needed to ask. What had Sunny been doing all these years alone in his house? Did he still like the same things he did when they were kids?

*Did he still like eating steaks and drinking grape sodas? Did he still like to play games? Did he play games while he was locked away inside? Should Basil ask him which ones?*

Did Sunny still like to draw? To read? Should Basil show him the novel that Polly had left him? Would Sunny like it?

**Books? That's what you're sitting here thinking about? Do you really think Sunny wants to hear about your stupid books? God, maybe you *should* apologize again.**

Basil shivered. It was too cold in this hospital bed. His blankets weren't thick enough. Should he ask the nurses for another blanket? There was a button next to his bed... *but he didn't like to use it.* He didn't want to bother them.

Basil shivered again. He wondered if Sunny was also cold right now. Was Sunny tucking his head under the blankets, desperately trying to heat his body?

*Poor Sunny... he was so thin. Shivering by himself in the dark...*

*Basil should visit him.* He could use a hand right now, even if it was only Basil's. *M-Maybe B-Basil could h-help him stay warm... hold his hand and heat his icy fingers...*

**You're disgusting.**

**Sunny hates you. He hates you and he's only hiding it because he knows how pathetic you are. Even after everything you've done, you still need other people to take care of you. People who you can never tell anything to, because then they'll know that you're not worth the effort. Why try so hard for someone so who is so easily disposable, so easily replaceable? Sunny tolerates you now, but once he has anyone else to lean on again *he'll leave, like he always does*.**

**She was in a bed just like this. Don't you remember? She never left that bed, and now you'll never see her again. Grandma *just* died and instead of mourning her death you're sitting here narcissistically obsessing over the thought of breathing the same air as the boy whose life you ruined. *How do you do it? How do you always somehow manage to find a way to become worse than you already are?***

*Grandma...* Basil's grandmother would be so ashamed of him now, after what he did. She had only been gone a day and Basil had completely fallen apart. Hurt himself and his friends.

Hurt them in ways that they would never heal from, mentally or physically. He never changed.

Kel had visited earlier. He asked questions. He... *apologized*. Kel was hurt but he did it. Kel was confused but he hid it. He was struggling much harder than he showed.

Should Basil have asked Sunny if Kel had visited him, too? What if he didn't want to talk about it? Had Kel said something bad to him? Did Kel forgive Basil but not Sunny? *That wasn't fair.* All of this was Basil's fault.

*Calm down*. You're never going to get to sleep like this. You need something to help you relax. Read a book.

Basil flipped through the pages of the photo album that Sunny had returned to him. A couple of the polaroids were still in Sunny's possession, but the bulk of them had been left with Basil.

These images of their precious memories which had spent so long shrouded in black marker were now wiped clean. Sunny said that it was Aubrey who had done that. *Did she really?* Basil couldn't believe how good they looked again. The blonde felt tears start to build in the corners of his eyes. She looks like she's happy... but Sunny said she had thrown out those images of herself.

Should he have been more embarrassed about looking through this album with Sunny? There were a lot of images of him... and a lot of them were of him sleeping. Basil didn't think much of that when he was younger but now it felt as if owning these vulnerable images of his friend was somehow inappropriate. Sunny probably thought Basil was some kind of creep for clinging on to these in the obsessive way he did.

The gardener struggled to keep himself from starting to cry again. He had been crying an unreasonable amount since the two of them had arrived in the hospital, and the nurses continually walking in and asking him if something is wrong was seriously embarrassing. Maybe it shouldn't have been? His grandmother had just died... does that mean its okay to cry for now? Does he deserve to be able to cry this time? Would he ever deserve that?

Basil ran his fingers softly against the cut in his stomach, feeling the wound ache in response. If the blonde had only cut a little further, would he have been with Grandma instead?

*Would he have been with M-*

**Basil suddenly froze in terror**. His hospital door was now opening, and a shadowy figure started to creep inside. For a moment Basil felt as if he was going to cry out in fear, but he wasn't even sure if what he was looking at was real or another instance of his broken mind playing tricks on him.

That fear did not last long however, as Basil easily recognized the worn-out form of the person creeping into the room from a distance, even amongst the shadows. Sunny was coming in again.

*"S-Sunny? What are you doing? W-Why aren't you asleep?"* Basil inquired, trying to keep his voice down.

Sunny's shoulders jumped in surprise, as if he didn't expect that anyone in the room was actually going to be awake to speak to him. He seemingly panicked for a second before responding in an extremely faint whisper.

*"Hi, B-Basil."*

Basil was not even slightly used to hearing Sunny speak his name again, but something about hearing him whisper it like that in the darkness made Basil's breath stop completely.

*Sunny was in the room.* Basil was thinking about him again and he appeared like magic. Sunny is in the room again. He's here.

**Wipe that giant smirk off your face. How are you going to lecture him about sneaking out of his room again if you're sitting here grinning like an idiot. You're not going to fool anyone like that. *Useless.***

"W-What's the matter S-Sunny? W-Why are you visiting in the m-middle of t-the night like this?" Basil inquired, stuttering heavily.

Sunny hesitated before responding. He seemed to be searching for a reply. "I.. *I couldn't sleep.* I had a nightmare." Sunny admitted, looking somewhat ashamed of himself.

*He couldn't sleep! He couldn't sleep either! He probably couldn't sleep because he was so cold givehimyourblanket-*

"Do you w-want to talk about it?" Basil asked.

"I... no... *I don't know."* Sunny struggled. Basil pursed his lips.

"H-How are you? Does the bruise on your face still hurt?" The black-haired intruder asked him. The blonde shook his head.

Basil stared at the white bandage clinging tightly to Sunny's missing eye. *Does **Basil's** face still hurt? Who cares?*

**Sunny came back again. Even after everything you did he's still here alone in your room, trying to comfort you. The whole thing is like some kind of cosmic mistake. A sick, demented joke.**

*You need to tell him how you feel. Tell him right now. You won't get another chance like this, ever.*

**Don't tell him, you'll only make him hate you more.**

*Tell him. He needs to know before he leaves or he's never going to come back.*

**Don't. He's leaving you forever and you're only going to make this harder on yourself.**

*Tellhimtellhimtellhimtellhimtellhim-*

Basil swallowed and struggled to gain a temporary hold on his violently-twisting emotions.

"Basil, are you okay?" Sunny asked. "You seem kind of... *uncomfortable..."* Sunny trailed off and mumbled.

"D-Do you want me to go so you can sleep?" Sunny asked, moving backwards towards the door. "Should I leave?"

**YES!** *NO!*

*"W-Wait!"*

Sunny stopped moving.

"I don't want you to go, but we should both probably try to sleep..." Basil said, trying to release a bit of the tension from his breath.

Sunny didn't move back towards the door, but he nodded. The two of them both stopped speaking for a moment.

This felt a little awkward. Basil needed to say something.

"Have you been cold in your room, S-Sunny?" The blonde asked. "I've been having a bit of trouble sleeping because it's a little chilly in here. T-They need to turn d-down the air conditioning I think..." Basil stuttered, trying to move the conversation somewhere else, even though he had just told Sunny that he should probably leave.

*"I've been a little cold."* Sunny admitted.

Sunny crept forwards again. He lifted his head and stared out Basil's hospital window at the stars for a moment.

**He's getting close. You're alone in the dark again. This is really bad. You need to tell him to stop visiting you. He is never safe when he's around you.**

*NO! You can't abandon Sunny, he needs you now more than ever!*

**You're just telling yourself that to feel better. *Stop being selfish.***
*You're just telling yourself that to feel better. Stop being selfish.*

*Sunny turned and moved towards the bed.* He stared into Basil's eyes for a brief second, but averted his gaze to the floor a moment later. Sunny stood at the side of his bed now. Basil felt his heartbeat double. Sunny kept staring at the ground.

*"S... v... r..."* Sunny mumbled something under his breath so quietly that Basil couldn't catch it.

*"S-Sorry Sunny, I missed that. What did you say?"* He whispered.

Sunny's remaining eye shifted from side to side for a second, softly reflecting the dull glow of summer moonlight creeping in from the window.

"...Scoot over."

*Huh?*

*The damaged muscles in Basil's gut clenched violently in response to Sunny's request, but Basil barely registered the pain.*

*Basil should have hesitated.* He should have taken a moment to consider what the hell he was doing, why he was doing it, or the fact that this hospital bed was not even remotely large enough for two teenagers. He should have hesitated to make it look as if he wasn't nearly as enthusiastic about the idea as he actually was. Basil did not hesitate however, and his right arm was soon hanging off the side of the mattress in an insane attempt to concede to Sunny's irrational desire to enter the bedspread. *He's actually getting in...*

Sunny hated sleeping alone, which used to often be a problem for him, as he would fall asleep quite frequently and sometimes his other friends would leave his unconscious body behind to rest.

*Basil could never leave him like that. He didn't want Sunny to wake up alone and think all his friends had left him... that would be awful.*

Basil didn't say anything as Sunny crawled on top of the hospital bed, and he didn't look at him while he slid under the now-shared covers. If Basil had responded to either of those things, he might have passed out from the excruciating anxiety.

Their arms were squeezed up against each other now. It was obvious that this was going to happen, and yet the sensation of Sunny's skin poking against him from under the blankets still somehow managed to make Basil jump slightly in his seat.

*"Sorry..."* Sunny apologized.

"T-That's okay..."

Basil's face felt like it must have burst into flames. He hoped that the other boy couldn't notice it in the darkness. The two laid silently next to each other now, neither daring to turn their necks towards the other in likely fear of realizing exactly how close their faces actually were.

Every time Basil felt as though his face was finally going to cool down, Sunny would adjust himself slightly and the soaring embarrassment would immediately return with full force. *Why had he scooted over so casually? He could have just told Sunny no... or at least told him it was a bad idea first...*

The two laid side-by-side without speaking. Basil felt like his increased breath had to be obvious and felt his embarrassment continuing to build, but Sunny seemed to be a bit nervous as well. His breathing seemed normal... but he kept moving. Basil's anxiety spiked every time Sunny began to move again.

Basil considered for a moment the way Sunny had reacted when the blonde had first spoken to him from across the room. Sunny seemed to have jumped as if he didn't expect Basil to still be awake, but...

*Then why was he visiting? What would Sunny have done if Basil was already asleep when he entered?* Basil felt his heartbeat continue to build upon itself. Sunny moved again.

"T-There's no way we're ever going to fall asleep like this." Basil admitted. "N-Not to mention that if you try to stay in here until morning the nurses are going to be extremely upset..."

*Sunny didn't say anything in response, seemingly hesitating. Basil began to wonder if he really was going to try and stay all night.*

"You're right. I should head back to my room now..." Sunny conceded.

*Basil froze.* He could feel Sunny's head turn to view him from the other side of the mattress. Sunny was looking at him right now. If he turned his head they would be face to face.

He unfortunately has no option but to rotate his neck as well. If Sunny had finally looked over and Basil refused to look at him in return, then the flower boy would come across as an awkward weirdo. He would make it seem like this situation was something to take super seriously, which it wasn't. The two of them had shared the same bed lots of times in the past. Basil needed to stop freaking out about everything.

He turned his head to look back at Sunny. One eye stared back at him.

*"Goodnight, Basil."*

Sunny wasn't speaking any louder than he had been before, but those words almost felt deafening.

*Tell him.*

Sunny sat up and slid off the side of the hospital bed. If Basil was going to tell him, the chance had finally left. The empty space filled by that tension would likely be swallowed up by regret instead. Basil watched with an unbearable mix of emotions building inside him as Sunny began to creep back towards the door.

*Basil was confused and happy that his friend has visited him. Sad that he was leaving, regretful that he had wasted his chance once again, ashamed to even strive for Sunny's attention after everything he'd done. Angry at himself for never changing.*

His damaged insides squirmed and twitched and ached and stung with an unbearable pain... *but it wasn't from the cut.*

Maybe he should stand up too. Maybe he should run up and grab Sunny's arm right now and tell him to never leave again. If he expressed the depth of what he felt, if he cried and sobbed and begged... *would Sunny stay?*

*Maybe he would.* Maybe Sunny was equally desperate to escape from the never-ending hole the two of them would slide down for the rest of their lives. Maybe Basil could convince Sunny that the two of them were bound together now, and that no other person would ever understand him the way Basil did.

Maybe he could get Sunny to... *run away again.* Reassure Sunny that it **was** right to turn his back on the world, but that he should have let Basil stay alongside him. He could tell Sunny about how it would be different with the two of them, that he would do anything for him, and that no matter where they went they would be happy.

Maybe he could have done any of those things. Said any of those things. But he didn't.

*Because those ideas were just that.* Pleasant illusions and delusions Basil used to fill himself with a false hope that allowed him to enjoy these remaining days in which Sunny was still shining brightly in his hospital room.

*The plan hadn't changed. It never did, really. Basil knew what kind of ending his story had before he even met Sunny.*

This was a nice detour, though. A beautiful, wonderful, precious thing. Basil would continue walking by his friend's side until the universe tore him away by force. Took him somewhere

Basil couldn't hurt him anymore. But Basil promised himself not to fight that inevitable severance. He would accept his punishment in silence.

Sunny reached the door and peeked out into the hallway. He turned to face Basil one last time, and silently waved in farewell. Basil softly waved back.

*Goodbye, Sunny.*

Basil never did get any rest that night. The dawn finally broke the sky, and Basil's eyes remained open. He exhaled through his nose as a misplaced tear hit his bedsheets.

*That was okay. He'd have plenty of time to sleep later.*

# Lights On

Basil closed the door and locked it immediately, in a motion so swift that Sunny almost didn't see him do both. The blonde grabbed Sunny by the arm and quickly dragged him through the bathroom door, which he also promptly locked. Basil was breathing very rapidly.

"Basi-"

*"SHHH!"* Basil slammed his hand over Sunny's mouth for the second time since they arrived. "D-Don't say anything!!!" He hissed. The two of them took a seat on the floor, Basil practically pushing his friend backwards with the hand he had planted over his maw.

*Sunny was silent. The room was dark.* They were currently locked behind two lines of defense, but Basil still hadn't let go of Sunny's arm. Both of the blonde's hands were seriously invading his friend's personal space right now. If he wasn't so afraid, Basil would likely have found their current position quite embarrassing.

The two waited with baited breath, listening to see if they could make out any sound of someone moving down the hallway or opening any of the display room doors. They maintained their current position as a tense minute past.

Finally done waiting, Sunny grabbed the edge of Basil's hand in his fingers and slowly removed it from his mouth, as the blonde finally let go of his arm with the other. Sunny's friend took the serrated knife from his right pocket and held it with a shaky grip as he stared at the bathroom door in a trance.

While Basil was distracted, Sunny stood up behind him and started moving towards the doorway with his arm outstretched.

*"Sunnywhatareyoudoing-"* The blonde worriedly whispered at him.

Sunny flicked the light switch in the bathroom.

Basil loudly yelped in surprise as photons flooded the room. Sunny's eye stung in protest as the two of them sat in the first fully-lit room they had occupied since they arrived in this building.

"I guess… *the power really is back on.*" Sunny stated, feeling an unsettling mixture of relief and fear.

*The two boys stared at one another, wide-eyed.*

"Basil, we need to go try the phones again."

"B-But…" Basil argued. *"W-What if there's someone out t-there?"* He whispered, teeth chattering.

“The lights are probably just on in the lobby because someone left them on. The power came back and the lights did too.” Sunny claimed, trying to calm his friend somewhat.

“M-Maybe.” Basil agreed. “But I don’t want to just assume that’s true…”

“So you just want to sit here and wait?” Sunny inquired.

*“Yes.”* The flower boy confirmed.

“What if the power goes back out again and we miss our one chance?” Sunny argued. "I don't hear anyone out there and it would only take a quick second..."

Basil stared at Sunny's face and nervously chewed the side of his finger. His eyes darted to the bathroom door, and then back to Sunny. The blonde took in a breath before speaking again.

*“...Stay here.”*

“Basil, **No**-”

“Sunny, you have had so many head injuries-“

*“**Basil**, I am **not** staying here in the bathroom!”*

“Y-You can barely see anything and you can’t run-“

“**B A S I L**.”

Basil looked extremely guilty. “I’m s-sorry Sunny, I just want to be safe…”

“Please stay here… *for me?”* Basil asked, his eyelashes fluttering lightly.

Sunny stared him right in the face, his single eye boring directly into the flower boy’s head.

***“NO.”***

Basil sighed with exasperation, his power move failing to be as effective as he had hoped.

The two of them stared at the door for another minute or two, waiting one last time for sudden monster noises before Basil finally opened the bathroom door and returned to the bedroom. He looked back at Sunny once, smiling nervously, before finally creeping to the display room door and slowly turning the knob again. The two of them quietly walked into the hall, and Sunny closed the door shut behind him.

Sunny and Basil stepped quickly but nervously down the display room hallway and towards the blindingly-bright rays of light flying in from the lobby.

Sunny was shocked at how different everything appeared with the lights on. It was kind of comforting to no longer be stuck in the dark, but also somewhat scary. It felt like waking up from a terrible nightmare, but into a house that wasn't yours.

With the lights finally back on, this place looked even fancier than it had before. Sunny suddenly felt a bit more underdressed than he did previously. This business was for people with big moneybags, not big bags under their eyes. He sneezed.

Him and his friend entered the illuminated lobby. Basil and Sunny both simultaneously picked up phones at the front desk.

*No dial tone.* Sunny punched in some numbers, but there was no response. Judging by Basil's expression, he didn't seem to be having much luck either.

*"Oh come on…"* Basil grumbled.

"Maybe the lines are down?" Sunny suggested.

"Or maybe a power surge messed them up?" Basil wondered out loud.

The blonde turned on one of the laptops that had previously ran out of power. The two waited with baited breath for the computer to start. The screen lit up. It was still locked, but a small list of numbers confirmed for the pair something they had been questioning since they had arrived here.

*Late Summer. August 18th. Sunday.*

For a moment, neither of them speak. Sunny feels a wave of relief wash over him, followed by an even larger wave of confusion. ***Snow?***

"We should go check all the phones and computers and see if we can use any of them." Basil stated, concluding the brief silence.

"ALL of them?" Sunny complained, thinking back to the extended office hallway.

*"All of them."* Basil confirmed.

Sunny and Basil speed-walked through the hall, flipping switches as they went. The building which had previously been drowning in shadows was coming to life in blinding light.

"Maybe now that the power is back the heat will turn on and the building will start warming up again?" Basil suggested, watching his breath dissipate in the cold air.

The two of them wandered through the mass of offices, checking for unlocked computers or functioning phones. It was a tedious process, but both of them were driven by the sudden surge of hope that they might still be able to contact someone.

*“Any luck?”* Sunny asked his friend as he set down yet another receiver. The blonde shook his head.

“Maybe they write down their computer passwords somewhere?” Basil suggested, digging through a massive stack of random papers that had been jammed inside one of the desk drawers. It was almost the size of his head.

*“Good luck with that.”* Sunny encouraged the blonde, quietly snickering to himself.

The flower boy crept from desk to desk, peeling off and reading sticky notes in hopes that one might reveal a potential passphrase. Basil audibly sighed.

“We need to check upstairs, there’s another set of offices up there.” The blonde stated.

“There is?” Sunny asked. *“Where even is the staircase?”*

“Door at the end of the hall.” Basil stated.

The two began creeping up the stairs, both ascending with a surge of adrenaline-fueled momentum. Sunny’s head still hurt a little, but the medication from earlier was helping.

Basil flicked on the light at the top of the stairs. The two looked over a mass of painfully-mundane cubicles that sprawled evenly across the second floor. *“When did you even go up here?”* Sunny inquired.

“After I tied- *After we read that book and you fell asleep.*“ Basil corrected himself. Sunny caught that.

*Him and Basil took a single step towards the cubicles when Sunny suddenly felt something soft and wet squish underneath the bottom of his sole. He recoiled immediately.*

"Eww, what the heck..." Sunny mumbled, looking down at the brown substance that was now clinging to the underside of his foot. "I stepped in something on the floor!" he expressed. Sunny finally took note of the smell. *Disgusting.*

Basil scrunched his nose. "S-Sunny that's really gross..." The blonde complained.

"What is this stuff?" Sunny wondered aloud.

A look of realization dawned upon Basil's face. "Uh, remember that raccoon I told you about earlier?" The boy said.

"What? *Awwwwww... gross."* Sunny finally understood what he had just stepped in. Basil hid a chuckle behind his hand. Sunny glared at him and violently rubbed his foot across the carpet. Basil only struggled harder not to laugh.

After revisiting the restroom on the first floor so that Sunny could wash off his foot, the pair returned to the second floor and prepared for a thorough sweep of the area.

“I-I’ll start on this end, you start on the other!” The blonde enthusiastically suggested, and Sunny took position on the opposite side of the cubicle room.

The two of them began moving from cubicle to cubicle. Sunny was getting a bit distracted by all the remnants of real human beings that had been left behind. Someone had abandoned a bowl of hard candy that was now sitting alone by their desk. Sunny picked it up and carried it along as he went. There were photos of people’s spouses, families, pets…

Sunny suppressed his sudden urge to mourn the precious photos he had lost. *It was okay.* They’d just.. *make new memories, right?*

Every single phone line was as apathetic to Sunny’s advances as the last. If rats had been chewing the telephone cables, they had been thorough. Sunny finally reached his end of the castle of cubicles, and turned to face Basil as he appeared a moment later.

“Any luck?” Basil inquired.

“Nope.” The boy replied. *“Want some candy?”*

Basil did not respond. He just kind of stared at Sunny awkwardly.

Sunny propped the bowl of candy under his arm and snapped his fingers. "Hey. Are you okay? Earth to Basil..." The other boy blinked and refocused himself.

"Y-Yeah haha, Sorry. Just uh... thinking." Basil faked a laugh and scratched his neck.

*Sunny wanted to inquire about that but it didn't seem like Basil was going to explain any further.*

The two continued onwards through the second floor as Sunny stuffed his mouth with stolen sucrose. They found a few more offices and a conference room with some colored bar graphs pasted enthusiastically on the walls. They split up to check the remaining offices. Sunny found a cool snow globe on someone’s desk. He considered showing Basil, but his friend seemed a bit preoccupied.

There was a small kitchen hiding away between two of the office spaces, but within the fridge Sunny only found a jar of pickles and what might have been an edible salad at some point. He did not unwrap it.

Sunny set the bowl of candy down on the island. He opened one of the cabinets. Paper plates and a box of crackers. *Maybe later.*

“Sunny? Are you still here?” Basil yelled from a nearby room. Sunny quickly turned back to the door and promptly walked face-first into the doorframe. Luckily Basil couldn’t see that.

He rubbed the bandage on his forehead and stepped into the office Basil was currently searching. Basil dejectedly sighed to himself as his friend entered.

“No luck?” The boy inquired.

*“No…”* Basil affirmed, letting out a small yawn. Basil had a really cute yawn... *FOCUS.*

"Getting tired, Basil?" Sunny asked, smirking a bit.

"No." Basil definitively stated. *Liar.*

“T-There’s another staircase.” The blonde leaned out of the room and pointed at a set of curved steps beyond the door.

Before heading up the stairway, Sunny and his friend checked out an office that appeared to have belonged to an older woman, as it was decorated with pictures of (presumably) her and her grandchildren. Many of the items on her desk were decorated in a soft pink. *Pink mousepad... pink picture frame... pink mug...*

The **actual** objects of interest were the two pairs of slip-on shoes that had been tucked away under a shelf in the corner. After some deliberation, Sunny and Basil decided who was going to be wearing the wrinkled slip-ons and who was going to be wearing the fuzzy pink ones. The old, wrinkled slip-ons were equipped by Sunny, whereas the fuzzy pink grandma shoes were put on by Basil. Sunny thought they fit him better, but didn't say that out loud. Instead, he argued that Basil had sacrificed the wellbeing of his feet earlier so he should be the one who gets the softer, warmer shoes. The blonde argued with him but Sunny did not relent his position.

The two of them stepped back into the hall and started walking towards the next staircase. The shoes Sunny was now wearing were not the proper size for him and slid around his toes somewhat awkwardly, but at least they would provide foot protection from the frozen asphalt if he had to go outside again.

*"Why couldn't we have found these **before** I stepped in poop?"* Sunny quietly complained. Basil giggled to himself.

The two of them reached the second set of stairs. *Sunny noted that Basil was walking kind of strangely...* but so was he. It was probably weird to walk in oversized, fur-filled fluff shoes.

They ascended the steps together. Upon reaching the third and final floor of the building, Sunny and his friend walked through a very short hallway that had two more (somewhat fancier) offices and an exit door that presumably led out onto the roof.

Sunny stepped into the first executive office on his right. After judging the computer to be unusable and the phone line to be unresponsive, Sunny turned his attention to a hat rack that had been left unattended in the corner of the room. There was still a man’s coat hanging on it, the first article of clothing Sunny had seen in a while. He took it off the rack and carried it back into the hall where Basil emerged from the other office.

“Hey Basil, I found something for you.” The boy claimed, holding out the winter coat.

“Take off the blanket for a sec and let’s see how it fits.” Sunny suggested.

Basil squinted at him. “Sunny, that thing is WAY too big. And b-besides, *you found it so you should keep it…*”

Sunny tried sticking his arms through the coat to see if it was really as big as Basil said. The coat was heavy. He felt like he might fall over wearing this.

“Are you uh… doing okay under there?” Basil asked, inspecting the extremely oversized garment Sunny had forced onto himself. Basil fidgeted.

“Maybe one of us can wear this *later*…” Sunny conceded, removing the giant coat and laying it down on a chair.

After briefly checking through the executive offices, Sunny and Basil made their way to the hall’s conclusion.

At the end of the hall was a window out into the frozen world outside, and to the left of that window was one final office. The door had been shut and locked, but there were foggy glass panes beside the entrance that allowed viewers to see if anyone was currently working inside. Sunny put his face up against the viewport. A large, single desk sat menacingly on the other end of the door, empty chair pointing towards them as snow whipped against a huge glass wall that loomed over the front of the building. Pretty cool.

“I guess this is where the final boss would live.” Sunny spoke to his friend. Basil tried to yank the door open a few times, but it was locked tight.

“That could be the last phone and computer in this building.” Basil mumbled. “But none of the other phones worked, and I doubt whoever runs this place would be the one who would leave their computer unlocked, so I guess that’s the end of this. We’ll just have to wait and see if someone comes in tomorrow…”

“Do you want to do it or do you want me to do it?” Sunny asked his friend.

*“Do what?”* Basil inquired, tilting his head.

“I’m doing it.”

Sunny walked back into the first executive office and came back out carrying the de-coated hat rack. Basil stared at him quizzically before he lifted the rack above his head and swung it violently into the CEO office's windowpane. The shattering of the glass was extremely loud. Sunny flinched.

**“S-SUNNY!!??”** Basil stuttered in shock.

*“These are extreme circumstances that call for extreme actions.”* Sunny calmly stated a well-thought-out and entirely rational defense as his brain lit up with the dopaminergic pleasure of office demolition.

“I c-can’t believe you just s-smashed the glass like that…” the blonde stuttered again.

“You’re the one who killed the snack machine.” Sunny retorted, smirking to himself.

“**T-That’s different!** We needed food-“

“And **now** we need to see if this phone works…” Sunny finished his friend’s statement. The black-haired invader held out the end of the coat rack and jabbed at remaining fragments of glass that were still stuck around his improvised entrance. Basil watched with his jaw open.

“It’s like that one thing that Kel would always say.” Sunny claimed. “In for a penny, in for a quarter.”

“What? It’s 'In for a penny, in for a *pound'*…” Basil corrected him.

Sunny scrunched his nose and smirked. “Tell that to Kel.” He replied, stepping over the glass pane he had just shattered. It crunched under his newly-stolen shoes.

*“Sunny…”*

This office looked extremely expensive. This was the kind of place business supervillains in movies hung around while they monologued about their unspeakable plans. Even with no one currently there to occupy it, the chair at the head desk exuded a powerful aura of control. Whoever sat there would definitely become the *Bossman.*

Sunny sat down in the leather roller chair behind the desk and placed his elbows down on the wood, tenting his hands at Basil as if the blonde had just entered his monthly performance review. Sunny’s friend smirked and picked up the phone he was ignoring.

The gardener held the receiver to his ear for but a moment before setting it back on the desk and silently shaking his head. Sunny un-tented his hands and sighed. They checked the computer but it was just as locked as the door had been.

Sunny opened a rectangular cabinet under the desk and found several unattended bottles of vodka. He jokingly removed one and set it on the desk before gesturing at Basil to view his underage find. The blonde frowned.

“I guess even CEO’s need a break now and again...” Sunny joked, leaving the bottle on the desk and standing himself back up.

Basil poked at an office plant that was thriving beside the glass wall while Sunny opened a filing cabinet. The wind continued to howl against the side of the building as they resumed their search. Sunny opened a door to a huge bathroom that was directly connected to the office. There was a shower and a bathtub in there and everything, the entire space caked in dark slate tiles and smooth granite. Sunny tried turning on the water for a second but it was still freezing cold. He withdrew his hand from the liquid and dried it on a hand towel. Sunny looked through a few cabinets under the sink before finally exiting the room to speak with Basil.

*“Any sight of a cell phone in here?”* Basil inquired while looking through an enormous bookshelf that crawled along the wall.

Sunny skimmed through a stack of papers that he found next to a coffee table in the corner. *“No.”* He denied. “There’s nothing in here, just business stuff…” His friend sighed and fidgeted.

“So what now?” Sunny inquired.

“I guess we have to continue just sitting tight until someone finds us.” The flower boy stated, scratching his head.

“Maybe there’s more phones down in the warehouse part of the building?” Sunny suggested.

Basil didn't respond.

"Basil?"

*"...Basil!"*

"*Huh?* Oh, sorry..."

“M-Maybe.” Basil confirmed. Although I doubt we’re going to find any that work. If this was a power surge I would’ve thought a decent number of the phones would have survived…” he trailed off. “T-The lines must be down somewhere… we could keep looking for passwords...”

A moment of silence passed between them.

*“Oh!* I know what we should do!” The blonde expressed.

# The One he Would Miss

Chapter Notes

> TLDR, this is a standalone chapter about one of my personal favorite characters who hadn't showed up yet. Thanks for reading.

A woman walked home by herself. There was a trickle of rain coming down on her head, but she barely noticed it as she slowly grew closer to the building where she'd soon take refuge. Usually, there would be a pair waiting in this house for her arrival, but those days were over now. She walked towards the front door and held out her hand, but stopped before grabbing the knob. The woman lowered her arm again. She stared at the entrance. *Why even bother?*

She was a polite invader, an alien that visited other people's worlds and helped them through their individual struggles as best she could. A surrogate member of the family: further than your friends but closer than your peers. Someone to wait on the needs that, due to time or illness, became so difficult for people to handle themselves.

As a caretaker, death was part of Polly's job. Her previous client was an elderly individual who lived alone, and that job had lasted but a single full year. His wife had passed, as he did shortly after. It was Polly's job to take care of him during that fragile transition behind the curtain.

Living so close to death taught Polly truths about people that she had never spent much time considering when she was younger. She found that when people were dying, they very often talked about very small things. Instead of big ideas or grand plans, they would quietly and somberly express bittersweet memories that were largely inconsequential in the grand scheme of their lives. And yet somehow, Polly felt as though those tiny expressions were some of the most beautiful things in the world. Those memories shared became her memories too, and they were the ones she most fondly kept.

It was a mutually-accepted part of the job that the caretaker was very close physically, but often kept their emotional distance. After all, the person you were investing so much time in was usually themselves nearing their natural end, or would eventually grow out of requiring your constant assistance.

That sudden sense of severance was often painful, but it was ultimately an acceptable requirement for both parties involved.

**But this one was different.**

*Once his grandmother was gone, who was going to be watching over this boy?*

A boy who, despite his age, seemed as if he was carrying the weight of the entire world on his shoulders...

***Without the two of them, who was going to look out for Basil?***

Who was going to help him keep pests out of the garden?

Who was going to notice how he never ate as much as his body needed?

Who was going to wonder why his parents would never visit him, even for his 15th birthday?

Who would see him sit out on the back step and stare at the moon when he thought the rest of the house was already asleep?

Who was going to try and fail, over and over, to get him to open himself up to a single other person?

Technically, Polly had been hired to take care of his grandmother rather than Basil, but because he was his grandmother's responsibility, that meant Basil was now Polly's responsibility as well.

Basil's grandmother had been at her limit for a while. Although it was far from her place to speak of it to Basil, both of them seemed to silently acknowledge the condition that she was in. Neither ever spoke of it, each having no desire to draw attention to the incoming loss that was soon to split their improvised family apart. Once his grandmother was gone, Polly was likely gone too, and Basil would be left with no one but his flowers.

Maybe that's why Basil would never open up to Polly. He could already see ahead of time that their relationship had a clear expiration date.

When that changed, Polly had a fragile hint of hope that maybe Basil would then open up a little bit more to her.

She had been with Basil for over a year and a half, and those worries she kept about what his bleak future appeared to be only grew larger and sharper with time. She had half-expected that they would eventually mention this topic themselves, but the boy's parents seemed unconcerned and apathetic regarding it. At the very least, the pair clearly did not care enough to acknowledge the total isolation their son would eventually be condemned to.

*Polly would have to fix their mistakes herself.*

She reached out to them and asserted her concerns. She requested that they restate the specifics of her contract and submit a commission in written form such that she would become a legal caretaker of both Basil AND his grandmother, stating that an increase in pay would not be necessary. The two of them did not respond to her statements, but she still got what she had wanted nonetheless.

Polly was, in writing, consigned in a brief and unemotional letter received in the mail, officially inscribed as Basil's caretaker. Once his grandmother was gone, she would still be there for him. It likely would have happened regardless, but holding the physical assurance in her hands that she would stay in this house gave her a sense of ease.

Ease, and a fair bit of excitement. She knew it was kind of awkward of her, but Polly informed Basil of the news almost immediately. *She couldn't help it.*

She was as of then a permanent fixture in Basil's life, and hoped that he would therefore begin to relax a bit more around her. But that was not how it played out.

Basil had not been avoiding her because he felt she wasn't worth the investment, Basil avoided her because he was simply too busy for her. The boy seemingly fought through a hundred struggles a day without having to speak a single word, the interior of his skull a constant battlefield.

Sometimes she would tell an awkwardly improvised joke while she was in the kitchen during breakfast and he would laugh, but he would never smile. A brief chuckle of amusement perhaps, but not an expression of joy.

Basil's grandmother would sometimes humorously whisper into Polly's ear that out of the two of them, Basil would end up being more difficult to look after.

*She was right.*

Polly would try to ask him questions about his flowers, but more often than not Basil would restrain himself from lengthy explanations, even if it was clear his understanding of those plants was vastly more extensive than he was letting on. Whenever it started to seem as if Basil was going to experience a hint of genuine enjoyment for even a single moment, he would restrain himself. Whatever it was that Basil was so guilty of, it restricted his every action.

*That didn't make sense.* Basil was a good kid. Much better than he should have been, considering his age.

He didn't make dirty jokes, or skip his homework, or come home late with friends, or touch cigarettes...

Basil cursed, but only ever under his breath, when he believed no one was watching. His angry exasperations were never aimed at anyone or anything outside himself.

Hidden cruelties, willingly and generously handed out to but a single recipient. Tiny expressions of hatred, muttered in near-silence against the person speaking them.

*Would Basil have been angry if he knew that Polly heard? Would he be angry that she knew the terrible things he called himself?*

*The burning condemnations given to a boy whose only visible crime was* ***watering flowers?***

He would spend hours in the garden. Walking back and forth, looking over the same flowers over and over, as if the soil from mere minutes earlier could already benefit from additional care, which Basil would gladly provide, his eyebrows knit in quiet concern for the vegetation that depended on him. Polly would ask the gardener if he needed assistance, but he would only ever politely decline, thanking her repeatedly for those small, pointless offers. Basil would force a smile.

*All of Basil's smiles were sad smiles. None of them ever managed to reach his eyes.*

So Basil never actually smiled, not really. But if Polly was lucky, when she watched Basil tend the flowers alone on a quiet, comfortable day, he would at least be able to shed the constantly-worried expression that so frequently plagued the gardener's little head. His eyebrows would relax, and his eyes would sleepily droop under the soft warmth of the sun, that drowsy heat putting to rest the ever-disturbed tendrils inside his mind.

Basil never appeared happy. The best Polly ever saw him was *peaceful.*

Eventually, Polly started to accept that opening up was not something Basil did. She stopped asking prodding questions and ceased expressing polite platitudes to a person who was too far beyond them now. Instead, Polly would quietly offer Basil a mug of his favorite tea, and the two of them would sit together in silence. The only words being expressed then were those between Basil and the book in his hands. It was the most she could do for him.

There was never any happiness, joy, excitement, tenderness, hope, or comfort. But there would at least be peace.

Polly found that Faraway was a town that had many lonely people. People with broken homes and broken families, people with little more than the clothes on their backs, people who slept curled on park benches...

The kinds of people Polly was used to helping. The kinds of people her actions could grab on to. *Basil was not among them.*

*In time, she had come to realize that Basil was vastly beyond her own reach. Out of all the far away people in Faraway, Basil was the furthest.*

He walked down a road that no one but him could place their feet upon. Polly could only watch silently as the boy crawled through the mass of thorns that entangled his being. Those thorns dug into his skin and pulled at him. But Basil was a gardener, and watering plants was what he did. So those thorns grew stronger and stronger, obtaining life from someone who was more than willing to give away his own.

Polly didn't understand how, but it appeared this boy had long been split apart from the rest of the world by something so horrific it would never escape his lips. A secret that bound him, and kept him permanently trapped within himself. She had not known it when she entered, but *this house was Basil's prison.* He spent his time quietly tending to greenery that enclosed the edges of his cell.

*Basil was a kind boy*. He always wanted to look on the bright side, but seemed often incapable of doing so in regards to the one who needed it most. Polly wished more than anything that he could one day give some tiny hint of that gentle kindness to himself.

Pests would occasionally get into his garden, but Basil could never bring himself to harm them, even the most insignificant insect. He would simply pick them up and relocate them to a more-fitting bit of vegetation near the trees. On rainy days, he would pick worms off of the concrete and set them back in the dirt where they would no longer struggle. He seemed to have a deep appreciation for the small creatures that surrounded their house, and treated them with a sense of kindness that the world had refused him.

He would spend days in his room, but never seemed as if he had gotten any sleep. Basil's grandmother had shaky hands in her old age, so he would even cut his own hair.

*Should Polly have offered to cut his hair? Would Basil have let her?*

Polly liked Basil almost as soon as the two of them met, but it wasn't until sometime later that she realized exactly how fond she had grown of him.

She would often be out at the grocery store, picking out the ingredients she needed for next weeks meals, and she would find her thoughts repeatedly drawn to the flower boy watching over his grandmother back home. *Would Basil like this? Would Basil want to eat this?*

Basil didn't like sweets, but surely they were okay sometimes... Was fruit good? Which fruits does Basil enjoy?

She would wonder what he was doing at the house during her absence. Was he lonely?

*Her work was hard.* Basil's grandmother needed help eating, walking, going to the bathroom multiple times a day...

If she needed to go use the toilet in the middle of the night, Polly had no choice but to awaken and help her. She would apologize, but Polly knew it wasn't her fault, it was just another cruel aftereffect of time forcing its claws on the human body. Together they would walk to the bathroom and back again.

Occasionally, the constant efforts would catch up with Polly, and she'd have trouble keeping herself awake. She would sometimes fall asleep in the mornings, and awaken to a soft green blanket cast across her body.

He might have acted cold and evasive, but he couldn't really fool anyone. *Nobody else in the house could have done it.*

*Polly would ask him what was wrong, but his answers were always bullshit.* Usually, Basil would fill his watering can, slowly and methodically dripping its contents onto the patient plants in a well-established pattern. Each flower got what it needed, and was given ample time to absorb his care. That watering can, those shears... it often seemed as if there was not a single day that passed without their use.

It **seemed** that way.

But on some days, when she left Basil in the house by himself, she would come back and find that Basil didn't need the can that day. He'd be sitting quietly on the ground amongst the bees and butterflies, *his shoulders softly shaking, hands empty...*

*Sometimes, Basil didn't need the can. Sometimes the water he gave streamed down his cheeks.*

Eventually, she could not take the uncertainty anymore, and she asked his grandmother. It was not her place to inquire about something that was this sensitive, but Polly needed so badly to know. She asked Basil's grandmother if she knew what had happened to her grandson to make him this way, the origin of the terrible pain that seemed to eat him from the inside out.

She said that Basil had always been an anxious kid, but something in particular had changed him in a way that he never recovered from. She told Polly that although Basil didn't have friends now, he used to. A group of five other kids that did everything together, and that had brought Basil out of his shell in a way she had never seen before. She spoke with a wistful sadness in her voice about something precious her grandson had lost...

Polly asked where those friends were now, why Basil had been left behind or had drifted away from them.

She told her that the eldest girl of the group had died shortly before her and her brother were going to perform at a musical performance that Basil and his other friends were to be attending. *It was a suicide.*

*Polly's heart dropped.* She had her suspicions, but something that bad happening to someone who was so young was a horrible tragedy.

Basil's grandmother seemed grateful for Polly's maternal concern over him, but it still seemed as if there was nothing Polly could do with this information. Things continued on quietly, as they always did. The peace in house lingered on... *that awful, terrible peace.*

... Should Polly have said it to him?

*Should she have told Basil that she loved him? Would it have sounded stupid?*
*Would it sound like just another polite but meaningless claim from someone who always asked too much from him?*
*Someone who insistently overstepped bounds that had been established with her so many times over?*
*If she had told him, would it have changed anything?*
*If Polly told him how much she loved him, would he have even believed it?*

She should have told him. Now she would never get the chance.

*I'm so, so sorry, Basil.*

Polly wept.

*If she had offered one more mug of tea, would he still be here?*
*If she had said all the words that she held back for so long, would he have stayed?*
*Why was he always so miserable? Did he really believe every bad thing that happened to him was deserved? Is that misery why he was gone now?*

After it happened, Polly had blamed herself. She had despised herself for being so useless, so incapable of doing a single thing for him, but also knew that this was the direction that he had been pushed. Polly alone was not good enough. She didn't know who, but someone else needed to be there for him as well. ***Please****. She'd do anything.*

She received note from one of the nurses a few hours later that Basil was going to live. His condition had stabilized, and his bleeding had stopped. The recovery ahead was going to be difficult, but possible. His internal organs had only been grazed.

Polly tried to feel relief at the good news she had been given, but she couldn't help but feel hollow. She would take Basil home, but would anything be different this time? Would Basil open up to her now? *Would Basil please tell her what was wrong...*

When they finally allowed her to see him, he was still asleep. An exhausted young man decorated in bloody bruises and bandages. She wept for him.

*The other boy was not in a better condition.* Polly did not see him, but was told that his right eye was no longer functional. He would be visually impaired for the rest of his life. What Basil had done to his friend could never be undone. A voice in the back of her head had quietly suggested that he was the one who had tried to hurt Basil, who had begun this horrible confrontation, but she knew that wasn't the truth. Polly knew the way that Basil paused as he trimmed the garden with those shears. She had seen the scars that hid underneath his hands. *One of these boys had been harmed, the other had harmed himself.*

She almost couldn't believe that Basil had attacked his friend. That he had lashed out in such a way. It seemed completely unlike him. Did his friend have something to do with it? Something to do with Basil's constant, hopeless misery? His guilty suffering?

Polly was eventually asked to leave. She returned home, and gathered up some things that Basil might need while he was staying in the hospital. She returned the next morning, and was allowed to visit the blonde once more.

*When she pushed through the door and entered that room, she was surprised to find not one boy, but two*. One would turn red from a sudden wave of embarrassment, and the other would ineffectively attempt to hide himself behind the hospital bed. Polly was initially frightened when seeing Basil's friend sneaking around in the same room as him, but those suspicions vanished quickly.

"P-Please don't tell the nurses that S-Sunny is in here..." Basil would beg her. *Polly nodded. She wouldn't.*

Polly took a seat on the other side of the room, and flipped through a book she had brought in case Basil might have needed to take his mind off this cold, white room. Basil and Sunny would look over at her, but she wouldn't make any objections. She would silently lower her book and reassuringly wave to them before returning her gaze to the page she was pretending to read. They would watch her, but Polly would not raise her head again. When the two of them spoke, Polly was far enough that she couldn't make out their words. At first they were silent, but they eventually resumed their prior conversation in hushed voices and muttered words. Polly tried to respect their privacy, not glancing over all too often, but eventually she succumbed to her curiosity. She quickly looked at the two of them and felt the world around her take pause.

Polly almost couldn't believe her eyes. Under a beam of light from the hospital window, on that warm summer day, in humble conversation with a quiet friend...

*Basil was smiling.*

*...A soft summer breeze drifted in through the window.*

*The world had finally gifted Basil joy, but seemingly stole him away just as fast.*

Basil was gone again.

Polly cried loudly. She wept alone in an empty house that wasn't hers, for a boy she would now never know. The walls of that cell responded only with indifferent silence, as they always did.

She hoped against the universe that wherever he was, that Basil was taking care of himself.

In his grandmother's last days, Basil eventually abandoned even his final refuge. The garden went ignored, each flower left to fend for itself against the harsh, dry wind of a world that didn't show any concern. Polly tried to take care of them in his absence, but she did not know them as well as he did.

Basil left his flowers, and his grandmother left him. Polly could only watch as the story played out in exactly the way it shouldn't have.

It seemed as if Basil had left his garden behind because he had been planning to leave, too. Those shears were going to cut the stem of one last leaf, and Basil's quiet struggle would finally fade into the dirt.

*Basil would water nearly every one of his flowers, but there was always one sad little plant in the garden he would miss.*

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*“Speaking of injuries, you told me earlier that you would show me the cut on your stomach later but you never did...”*

*"Can I see it?"*

# Liar Part 2

It's early in the morning, the clouds in the air are thick, and although it had already broken the sky, the sun barely managed to reach Hero, his friend, and his brother as they walk together across their neighborhood as if all three were suddenly kids again.

Hero is a bit confused. He knows that this whole trip was his idea, but something doesn't quite make sense about what was happening right now. He watched the bright pink hair of the girl in front of him sway back and forth as they walked.

"Aubrey... how did you get out of the hospital so fast?" Hero asked, staring at the bandage still lingering on her arm.

"Because it was just a cut?" She replied.

"You know that isn't what I mean."

"I called them myself, I came in of my own accord and I told them it was just an accident. They had no reason to detain me." Aubrey plainly stated, not even bothering to turn around while speaking. Kel silently glanced at Hero's expression.

Hero didn't prod any further. Aubrey didn't seem like she was in the mood to talk of it anymore, and now wasn't the best time either way. Kel yawned. It was too early for any of this.

“Are you sure you want the two of us tagging along with you?” Hero politely inquired. “Kim seemed pretty mad when she told me you were in the hospital.”

“Yeah, she’s just… *yeah.”* Aubrey began and stopped again.

“I think Kim is just mad by default.” Kel claimed. Aubrey slowed down for a moment, allowing Kel to catch up before promptly stomping on his foot and then resuming her original walk speed.

"Ow!"

“I called her ahead of time and asked if we could talk in-person. She already knows you’ll be around.” Aubrey stated.

Aubrey approached Kim and Vance’s house and gave the front door a couple knocks with the back of her hand. Only a few seconds passed before the door swung open.

“Hey, hey! *Aubrey!!!”* Kim waved her hand excitedly. “...and the nerds, of course.”

“*Hey Kim!* Sorry about the short notice… I’ve got a couple favors to ask, if that’s okay.” Aubrey stated. “I swear I can make both of them up to you.”

“Yeah! Of course, Aubrey.” Kim confirmed.

“So I was wondering-“

*“Wait.”* Kim interrupted. “Before that…” the girl with glasses trailed off.

A couple of seconds passed by silently.

“Aubrey. Can I please talk to you in private?” Kim stepped to the side of the door, as if to invite her friend inside.

“Uh.. Y… Y-Yeah. *Definitely.”* Aubrey agreed.

The pink-haired girl turned back to look at her friends. “Just a minute, guys.” She claimed. Her and Kim stepped into the house and the door closed behind them.

Kel looked at his brother and shrugged. Hero figured he knew exactly what kind of conversation the two of them were about to have, but it wasn’t any of his business to draw attention to it. Kel would probably figure it out himself, anyway. Hero scratched the back of his neck and exhaled.

The two brothers sat down on the sidewalk facing the street, and tossed tiny pebbles of concrete across the asphalt, trying to see who could get their toss to bounce the furthest.

The pair continued their poorly-improvised game until a large young man with facial hair approached the two of them from the street corner.

“Oh hey, it’s you two! If you’re both here I guess that means Aubrey is with you?” Vance inquired, a wad of chewing gum audible in his mouth. Hero wondered why he was even up this early.

“*Yeah*… Yeah, she’s with us.” Hero confirmed. Kel nodded beside him.

A brief moment of silence passed while Vance surveyed their expressions and surroundings.

*“But she’s not sitting out here on the curb*… so I assume her and Kim are talking inside right now?”

Kel nodded again.

“*Yikes.* Then I’m outta here…” Vance chuckled with a sardonic grin nervously creeping onto his face.

“Take care of Aubrey for us, alright? And watch out for my sis, she’s been on the warpath recently…” Vance waved at the two of them as he walked back the way he came and disappeared around the street corner. Kel looked at his brother and smirked.

*Hero sighed. He hoped Aubrey was okay in there.*

*Hero and his brother resumed tossing pebbles into the street. Kel was winning.*

The concrete bits splashed silently into the puddles on the other side of the road. Kel started whistling as he threw. One of Kel's tossed bits of debris bounced onto the opposite sidewalk and landed in front of a squirrel. The rodent didn't even acknowledge his intrusion. Kel sneezed.

About fifteen minutes passed before Kim's front door reopened. Aubrey stepped back outside. She looked like she had been through a… *harrowing* conversation. She quickly wiped her face on her sleeve as she left the house.

Kim didn't exit the house again, but she smiled and waved at Aubrey from the doorway as her friend left. Aubrey turned and waved back before walking towards the brothers. Kel opened his mouth.

"Geez Aubrey what happened? Your eyes look really r-"

*Hero elbowed his brother in the ribs.*

"Hey! What the heck, Hero-"

*Hero elbowed him again.*

"Kim's dad has this beat-up old truck that he never drives, I thought they'd probably let us use it, but…" Aubrey trailed off. "It's wrecked. Kim says that if we tried driving that thing anywhere it would probably burst into flames on the freeway."

Hero chuckled nervously. "Yeah, lets try to look for an alternative on that."

Kel sighed. "Well, I guess asking mom is back on the table…" his brother muttered.

"Maybe since she knows how important it is to us she will say yes?" Kel suggested, trying to sound hopeful.

"I think I have a different idea." Hero mumbled.

"Have you guys already packed the stuff you need for this trip?" The medical student asked.

"Yeah." Aubrey confirmed.
"No." Kel un-confirmed.

Hero smirked. "*Kel, go pack.* Aubrey… have you talked to all your friends since you got out of the hospital?"

*"No…"* Aubrey mumbled.

"Then you should go talk to them, they were all worried. You two go do whatever you need to do and I'll call you later."

"Where are you going all of a sudden, Hero?" Aubrey asked.

*"Going to try one last ditch effort…"*

Basil was trying to ~~ignore the pain~~ look on the bright side.

He felt as if everything was going to be okay as long as he could ~~stay awake~~ stay positive.

The two of them were walking up the stairs to the second floor. The power had come back on, so Basil and his friend were rushing from office to office in an attempt to find a functioning method of contacting the outside world.

*Sunny was right. There was no one else in the lobby. We're both alone in here, and this is our big chance to make an escape. One of these computers has to have been left unlocked!*

**It hurts.**

The pair reach the second floor. Cubicles everywhere. Sunny steps in something gross.

*Poor Sunny! That raccoon left a nasty surprise for him. I'll just give him a minute to clean off his foot, hehe… There's so many cubicles in here! I wonder what it's like to work in a crazy place like this. Maybe the employees go out and wander in nature on their lunch breaks? Going on long walks amongst all the plants and mushrooms… that sounds really nice!*

*There are so many phones and computers in here to check... Wait, did I look at this one already? I'm getting a little turned around right now, haha...*

There's something fluffy on Basil's feet. Sunny has shoes now. Sunny finds a coat. It's too big. There's a glass wall. Sunny broke it. It's broken now.

*I can't believe Sunny just smashed through the glass like that! He needs to be more careful! I really need to keep an eye on him. "In for a penny, in for a quarter…" Geez…*

They're in a fancy office. Something about this office is scary. Sunny is really cute. The phone doesn't work. The phones never work. Never will.

*Bummer… it looks like there isn't any cellular phone in this office either. Maybe we should go back downstairs and look through everything again with the lights on? There's probably something we missed that could help us! I hope Sunny's head isn't feeling too bad…*

**It hurts.**

The two of them walk back down the stairs to the second floor. They were just here. Sunny is dragging that enormous coat he found behind him, and he tells Basil he found a box of

crackers in the kitchen if hard candy isn't his speed. Hard candy. It's been hard to eat, recently. Too much junk food.

*Sunny has been smiling! It's so nice to see him smile again, isn't it? He's making the most of this, and so should we.*

Basil and his friend gather the edible resources they acquired earlier and passed through the castle of cubicles. Sunny picks through his bowl of hard candy as they walk, trying to find the green ones. The blonde picked up a pen and notepad from a stranger's desk and was carrying them alongside the box of crackers wedged under his arm. Under his arm. Her arm. Lifting her with a hand under her arm. She won't wake up anymore.

*With this, I can write a message and leave it beside the door. That way, even if we're asleep, someone will immediately know to help us-*

**It hurts. *I get it.***

Basil intentionally slows down every time they go back down a staircase, but his eyepatched companion appears to be fine.

*Sunny's been really great at keeping his balance. He's barely bumped into anything recently! Look at him, doing his best, hehe…*

The two of them continue back down to the first floor and through the lobby. Sunny flicks on the hallway light as they return through the army of display room doors. It's bright. It hurts Basil's eyes. Sunny's eyes. Sunny only has one eye left. Basil stole it.

The two leave their meager food items on the coffee table in the bedroom. Sunny lays his monster coat down on one of the chairs so he doesn't have to keep lugging it around everywhere. She keeps getting heavier. As per Basil's request, the two of them exit the bedroom door again and start heading down towards the statue staircase.

Basil turns the light on at the top of the staircase. The previously-gruesome display of lost bodily fluids seemed almost normal now. Like it happened years ago. Like it was all just a bad dream. She's just dreaming. She just needs to sleep and then she'll get up again. Sunny coughs and walks quietly down the staircase with Basil in tow. Basil silently hopes they get to apologize to whoever has to clean the floors around here. She shouldn't have to sleep on that.

*This might be kind of gross, but it's best to just ignore it... it's just a staircase, after all.*

**It hurts.**

*Even if the phones don't work right now, It's really great that the lights finally came back! We can actually see where we're going again! Its so much easier to look on the bright side when the room is bright, too…*

The two of them continue onwards through the "employees only" gateway they had inserted themselves into previously, making their way back to the dining hall. Basil gazes once more

at the enormous potted fern as they pass. It has such beautiful fronds. Branches. Hairs.

*That fern sure is gorgeous… maybe one day I can have a plant like that in my room.*

*The two of us will get out of here soon. We'll just have to be patient and wait until someone rescues us! They'll find us out here eventually!*

**It hurts.**

*Then we'll head back to Faraway, and…*

*I'll be back in Faraway.*

*Sunny will be…*

*B-But Polly will be so happy to see us! H-Hopefully she hasn't been too worried about all this! I'll have to apologize to her a whole lot, haha...*

**It hurts.**

The two boys enter the employee dining hall and climb over the serving bar once more, making their way towards the back of the kitchen. Basil goes on top of the counter first and offers Sunny a hand as he scrambles over. A hand. hands. Her hands are cold now. Sunny quietly thanks him for his help. Help. Basil was just trying to help. He didn't.

Basil had suggested that, since the power was now on, the two of them could try cooking a warm meal. Sunny had agreed, but was seemingly unsure of the culinary selection they had left behind last time. Vegan hot dogs, instant tofu, and… *Tteokbokki.* Which was some kind of rice cake? Maybe it was good for you?

**It hurts.**

Basil read over the cooking guidelines for their future table spread. All were suggested to simply be boiled in hot water until ready, so that's what the flower boy set out to do. With Sunny's assistance, he found and acquired a few pots of various sizes, and set them each on the electric stove, which was seemingly functional again with the humble aid of electricity. Aid. First aid. He took a lot of it. It wasn't working.

Basil warmed his hands over the glowing coils. *Ahhh… that feels so nice, doesn't it?*

**It hurts.**

*These hotdogs sure have a lot of protein in them for a vegan substitute… something like this is exactly what Sunny needs! Maybe if I put some actual food in my own stomach I will stop feeling so…*

*It's so nice to be able to eat without having to point a flashlight at everything. I'd never thought about how easy life is when you can just turn on a lamp whenever you want. I'm so glad this is all coming togeth-*

**It hurts.**

The blonde gives Sunny a mass of rice cake in a bowl. Basil plates up his tofu. The hot dogs are actually hot this time. It smells nice. It's too bad their other friends weren't here to share this. Basil was never the best cook amongst the group. Hero probably didn't cook anymore...

*I missed eating tofu. This boxed stuff isn't very good though... It's nothing like grandma used to make. You were never a big fan of tofu, were you? I should have kept more snacks over at my house back then...*

*Wow, it really hurts! Maybe I shouldn't have eaten after all! Haha!*

**Sunny is worried. He knows you took too much. He saw you taking too much. You always take everything from everyone.**

*Don't you think that fern is cool, Sunny? Did you know that ferns reproduce using spores instead of seeds? They don't make any flowers, but they're still really pretty!*

Walking. Moving. Office. Paper. Standing. Sitting. Walking. Hanging. Staircase. Floor. Hallway. Door.

*When did we go back to the bedroom? I barely even remember, hehe… help me...*

**It hurts.**

**Stop fidgeting. He'll see it.**

**If you pass out, he'll be alone. If there's someone else in here they'll find him. Sunny can't defend himself. He'll die. You'll wake up and he'll be dead. It hurts.**

*Shut up. There's nobody else out here.*

**You're right. YOU took him out here. You stranded him out here yourself. It hurts. You failed to kill him the first time and so now you're doing it all over again. Stop fidgeting.**

Please get up... I can't do this without you... Sunny needs you... Please wake up...

*Sunny never stopped being cute. I really love it when you smile like that... y-you don't have to smile at me like that, Sunny, hehe…*

*You know I don't deserve it, right? You know it's okay to hate me, right?*

*There's so many things I've wanted to say to you for so long, but for some reason now that you're actually here in front of me I can't get my mouth to open. Sorry I'm always like this...*

*Sunny... I have to admit something to you. Please don't be mad, okay? I haven't really been sleeping enough since we got here... or back when we were in the hospital, either.*

*I'm starting to feel a little bit funny.*

*Please look out for me, okay?*

**IT HURTS.**

Sunny stares and Basil stares right back. Sunny smiles and Basil smiles right back. Sunny tells a joke and Basil laughs.

*This is so much fun. Is it okay for me to have this much fun, Sunny? Is it really alright?*

*I don't want to ruin this… please keep smiling…*

**IT HURTS.**

*If I hadn't done the horrible things I did, I wonder how many more laughs like this we could have shared? Remember when you promised that we'd stick with each other? Why did you break your promise, Sunny? Why'd you stop answering me?*

*Is it because you hate me? You can hate me. I understand.*

*I really missed you… if I told you how much I missed you, how would you feel? Would you feel happy? Would you be sad?* ***Angry?*** *I'm sorry...*

*I'm sorry for missing you so much. I know that isn't fair of me. Will you forgive me?*

**IT HURTS.**

*I'm sorry I stopped trying to get you to come outside. I just wasn't sure if I could stand having you looking at me anymore... I should have tried harder before things got like this. I'll never forgive myself for that.*

*Do you think that our friends will ever forgive us? Even if we're never friends again... do you think that someday they won't hate us at least? Even if we aren't around anymore?*

*After you move and I... maybe they'll understand. I hope they'll understand.*

*I want them to be okay without us.*

**IT HURTS.**

*Do you think Aubrey is okay right now? I hope she didn't misunderstand why you disappeared... I really think you and her could work things out. Even if it takes a long time...*

*I know you always had a soft spot for Aubrey.*

*Sometimes I was a little j...*

*...well, anyway.*

**IT HURTS.**

*I've... I've been having really horrible dreams recently. I keep forgetting them every time I wake up, but that feeling still lingers in the back of my head, even when I'm awake. It's... scary.*

*Have you ever had a dream like that?*

*You were in my dream. I was trying to get to you, but I couldn't move...*

*I thought if I kept myself awake I wouldn't have to keep having dreams like those. They were really frightening... and I don't want to freak out again while we're trapped in here. I'm really trying but… I'm getting kind of tired… if I fall asleep, will you please stay with me? If I wake up alone in here and you aren't there… please don't do that to me, okay?*

**You need him to fall asleep first, then you can lock the bedroom door. If he falls asleep, you can pass out in the bathroom. It will stop hurting eventually. You just need rest. He needs rest.**

*You were looking out for me, weren't you? You really didn't have to do all that...*

*You didn't have to tell them you did it. You could have said it was me. You could have told them I was the one who pushed her. Who did everything. After what I did to your eye, they probably would have believed you.*

*Maybe... maybe I wouldn't have even minded. Not as long as you came back. I know you're not like that, though... you're a good person, Sunny.*

*You're nothing like me.*

*It hurts, Sunny. It never stops hurting, does it? Haha...*

**You're so close. Sunny is getting tired. He hasn't noticed yet. Just a little longer.**

**IT HURTS.**

*Do you still remember any of those stories I used to read you, Sunny? It's funny... I've forgotten a lot of the stories I read when I was younger, but I still remember all the ones I read to you. Did you ever finish that one book I recommended? It's okay if you didn't...*

*Did you really enjoy listening to me ramble on like that? Or would you get bored halfway through and just humor me...*

*I'm sorry I stutter so much. I know it's very annoying. I really did love reading to you. Even if I would sometimes get distracted by my audience, hehe...*

*I've never been that good at talking to other people, but with you I'd always found it a lot easier...*

*...or a lot harder.*

*Your mom asked me not to talk to you anymore. I promised.*

*I guess neither of us are that good at keeping promises.*

**IT HURTS.**

*I... I don't think your parents ever liked me very much. I think maybe it was the way I dressed. I'm so sorry I came over looking like that... you must have been really embarrassed of me.*

*Mari had always insisted that it was okay for boys to wear stuff like I did.. but maybe that was just the way that she was.*

*I still dream about her a lot.*

*In some of the dreams... she's angry. She says things to me. To make sure I remember.*

*But in some of them... she's exactly the way she always was. Beautiful. Kind. She pours us both a drink, and asks me how I've been.*

*Those dreams hurt a lot more.*

**IT HURTS.**

*During those four years you were gone, I had so much time to change. To become a better person.*

*I didn't. I'm sorry.*

*I tried for a while. I wanted to be a better version of myself for when you finally came back...*

*But eventually, I stopped believing you were ever coming out again.*

*I'm sorry I lost faith in you... even if I wish you came back a little sooner.*

*Will you please say it again? Will you say you forgive me for stabbing your eye again?*

*It feels kind of nice to hear you say that, even if it isn't true...*

**IT HURTS.**

*I’m so, so glad you came back for me, Sunny. I really wanted to see you one more time… I'm sorry we got stuck in a place like this. You could have left me forever, if you wanted. I know I deserve it.*

*Do you think we'll get to see her again after we're gone? I think you will, Sunny. Please tell her that I'm sorry for me? I don't think I'll be there to say it myself...*

*I think I might be somewhere else. Try not to think of me too often, okay?*

**IT HURTS.**

Table. Talking. Staring. Bedroom. Laughing.

Where are we? I'm tired. Don't look. I'm sorry. Please don't look at me.

*Sunny asked if he could see my cut… He can be kind of quiet, but he’s always looking out for everyone, isn’t he? Hehe…*

***IT HURTS.***

*Please kill me.*

***IT HURTS.***

*I can’t do this anymore.*

***IT HURTS.***

*Please don’t smile at me like that.*

***IT HURTS.***

*I have to tell you something…*

***IT HURTS.***

*...I don’t know if I can keep standing up.*

***IT HURTS.***

*You always had such beautiful eyes, Sunny…*

***IT HURTS.***

*You and her had the same eyes.*

***IT HURTS.***

*I’m sorry. I don't think I'll ever be able to tell you how sorry I am.*

***IT HURTS.***

*I’m so sorry.*

***IT HURTS.***

*She’s waiting for me...*

***IT HURTS.***

*Sometimes...*

***IT HURTS.***

*I feel like I can hear her.*

# Mistakes

After having finished scoping through the offices for the time being, Basil had suggested to Sunny that the two of them return to the meal room and cook the food they had left behind previously. Sunny knew exactly what he meant. *He wanted to make that tofu.*

The flower boy noticed the look on his face and insisted he needed to eat something that didn't come out of a foil bag. Sunny groaned. Basil was... *probably right.* He needed to eat actual food if he wanted to eventually stop kissing the floor. Maybe he'd just have a weird hot dog again. Basil loved tofu, it would be a crime for Sunny to steal any of it from him...

The pair had descended all the way back to ground floor of the building and made their way past Basil's fern-boyfriend, entering the dining hall once again. After some effort, they managed to find the correct cooking implements they needed to boil some corporate leftovers, and Basil got to work operating the stovetop while Sunny took a seat on the floor. Basil insisted he rest, and Sunny found it difficult to argue with that request. His head was killing him.

The two of them had seemingly both cheered up a bit with the lights on, and Sunny had gotten himself locked in a lighthearted and comical debate with Basil over the ethics of office demolition.

"I still can't believe you just smashed into the glass like that..." Basil stated, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Oh, so you can destroy things but I can’t?” Sunny protested, smirking to himself. "That doesn't seem very fair to me."

“It’s... *It's different when you do it.”* Basil argued.

“**Different, how?**” Sunny laughed.

"Y-You know what I mean!" Basil insisted. Sunny laughed again. He really didn't.

"This place does like, interior design or whatever, right?" Sunny stated. "I was just helping redesign the doorway a bit. The boss around here has a more open floor plan now." Basil covered his face with his hand and giggled.

After only a few minutes spent boiling their dinner into a steaming feast, Basil handed Sunny a bowl of spicy rice cake and carrot-based hotdog. Basil plated himself some of the same, in addition to the tofu that Sunny had politely rejected (much to his friend's discontent).

The two ate in silence, but the recent surge in optimism made the air feel a lot lighter than before. Sunny had even started to relax a bit, but...

*Sunny felt kind of guilty.* He might have told Basil about what he had found outside, but he had still been a bit… *sneaky,* recently. He didn't want to start a habit of keeping secrets from

Basil. Sunny didn't want to keep any more secrets from *anyone.*

*He also felt a bit worried.* Sunny tapped his foot lightly on the floor.

“I have um, another thing I wanted to tell you.” The boy spoke.

Basil absentmindedly scratched at his arm. “*Okay?* What is it, Sunny?”

“…You know that liquid pain medication that we got from the first-aid kit?”

Basil froze. His eyelids widened slightly and he gained a nervous smirk on his face. He stopped looking at Sunny, faking interest in something across the room instead.

*“Y-Yeah? W-What about it?”* Basil stuttered.

“I, uh…” Sunny swallowed. Seeing Basil this nervous was making **him** nervous. *Basil’s face turned beet red.*

“D-Did you need some m-more of it, Sunny?” Basil inquired, trying to fake a smile of reassurance and failing miserably.

“I was um…” Sunny tried to speak again.

Basil tilted his head at him, looking as if he was about to explode.

“I see you… uh I *saw* you taking some of the painkiller when I opened the uh, *bathroom door.*” Sunny rambled.

Basil’s face turned a ghostly white. Sunny suddenly felt a wave of intense regret surge through his body. Maybe he shouldn’t have brought this up. Basil looked as if he might pass out from embarrassment.

“I j-just noticed that you were taking um…”

*Basil looked like he was about to die.*

“…A **lot** of it.” Sunny finished.

“*That’s!* There.. is… *hehe...*” Basil nonsensically mumbled and faked a laugh. *Sunny had broken him.*

The room turned quiet for an excruciatingly painful moment.

“Y-You got me, haha!” Basil tried to laugh the awkwardness off. “I guess I really was t-taking a bit much, huh??”

“I n-need to be more careful with my dosage…” Basil kept talking to Sunny but was staring down at the table instead.

“It’s just… I…” Wow. Sunny was about to win an award for worst ability to speak. He awkwardly scratched at the back of his head.

“I will uh, definitely be a bit more conservative with the painkiller next time.” Basil stated as firmly as he could manage, seemingly trying to force this conversation to a natural conclusion.

The room returned to silence once more. This time, the awkwardness actually felt a little better because it was obvious that they were BOTH struggling now. Basil itched at his fingernails. Sunny couldn’t stop smirking with embarrassed discomfort.

His discomforted smirk vanished immediately when Basil spoke next.

*S-So...*

“W-Why are you telling me this, S-Sunny?”

*Sunny’s train of thought derailed, all the passengers inside being violently toasted at once. He wasn’t expecting to be asked a question like that.*

“Oh, uh… you know.” Sunny said.

The room was terribly devoid of sound while Sunny hesitated.

“B-Because I was worried about you and stuff…” Sunny trailed off.

“Oh. *Y-Yeah!* Right…” Basil said.

Sunny felt his eyebrow tilt. Basil seemed surprisingly… *surprised* by that response. He kept fidgeting in his seat, likely from the surge of embarrassment.

Neither of them spoke any more. The tension in the air was still palpable, but it was tinged with a kind of… *understanding.* Sunny tried not to look directly at Basil’s face all too often, but when he glanced over he could see that Basil wore a tentative smile.

Sunny considered his strange luck. If they weren’t trapped alone in this building, one of them would have likely fled the room from embarrassment by now. Hilariously enough, these cold walls which had trapped them were now seemingly holding them together.

The tension in the room was crushing, but the two of them could take solace in the fact that they were both being crushed together. The empty silence continued, but its occupants accepted that quietude for what it was. Maybe it was okay for old friends to become really, *really* awkward around each other. This... wasn't all that bad.

Sunny considered speaking again. He felt as if anything he said in this moment wouldn’t likely come out right, but it probably wouldn’t come out ***wrong*** either. This was a temporary opportunity to speak whatever was on his mind, before the two of them ended up hiding behind a veil of 'normalcy' once more.

Sunny thought of asking Basil about his grandmother, but then immediately decided against it. That would instantly sour the mood into something depressing, and it had been so long since the two of them had joked around and smiled like this. Basil visibly fidgeted in his chair.

Sunny hadn't noticed, but he had started staring at Basil again while lost in thought. Basil's face flushed once more and the blonde looked away. Sunny would have broken his gaze as well, but to the boy's surprise, Basil actually set his eyes back on him but a second later. Sunny now stares and Basil stares back.

Sunny keeps staring at him, so Basil raises his hand and softly waves to Sunny as if his friend isn't sitting right in front of him. *Sunny smirks.*

"W-Why are you s-staring at me, Sunny?" Basil inquired, smiling nervously.

"Why are you staring at ME?" Sunny deflected the question.

"Y-You started it." Basil pointed out.

"So you finish it." Sunny comically demanded his friend break the stare first. He felt like he was being a little bit annoying, but maybe that's what they both needed right now. To break the awkwardness.

*Basil did finish it.* He blinked at Sunny's response and burst out laughing at how easily he had just lost. Sunny snickered alongside him, lying his head down on the table as he laughed. The tension in the air started to quickly dissipate.

For a moment, it was as if this whole experience was just one extended (and very-awkward) sleepover. Sunny felt his shoulders relax in a way that they hadn't since the two of them awoke in the back of the truck.

Basil had finally finished eating his tofu and the pair saw no reason to continue sitting around in the dining hall, so they both stood up and started drifting to no location in particular, re-examining the rooms they had visited in the days prior but now with the aid of electricity. It was nice, except Basil was still walking a bit wobbly… maybe Sunny should make him turn in for the night. Sunny tried to think of a way he could force Basil to go to sleep. He couldn't come up with anything.

The two spent a bit more time creeping through the offices on the first floor, sifting through stacks of papers and unlocked drawers looking for a computer password, or maybe a map of the area. They were in the same room, but had drifted apart a bit as they both skimmed through various documents. Sunny wondered if Basil would be mad if he knew that Sunny was having difficulty actually paying attention to what he was doing. Now that the lights were on, everything just felt less *urgent*, even if their situation hadn't really changed all that much. Sunny had noted that if the worst came to pass they could always become forklift operators and try to ride one of those back into civilization... wherever civilization was. *Basil seemed much less than thrilled with that particular concept.*

Maybe they could even hotwire the truck they came in on. Sunny had seen it done in movies lots of times... *how hard could it be?* Although... given how nervous Basil had been, the idea of him driving any sort of stolen vehicle down a snowy hillside made Sunny feel more than a little bit uneasy. Basil probably wouldn't let him drive.

*The eyepatched dreamer tried to focus his mind.* It was time to be serious, but Sunny was admittedly finding it a bit difficult. He kept getting distracted by his partner, and started trying to draw his attention from across the room.

Sunny started throwing paper airplanes at Basil. They kept soaring right past his head. Basil was pretending to ignore him, but Sunny saw that another smile had asserted itself on his face as he searched. Sunny wrote *"don't work too hard"* on a few of the projectiles and tried to get them to land right in front of Basil but wasn't having any luck. The blonde had quietly complained that Sunny was making a mess of the office for no reason, but he was still smirking when he said it. Sunny hoped Basil would relax a little more, like he had earlier.

Having had no luck unlocking computers, the pair began absentmindedly moving back to the display bedroom. Sunny had somehow gotten Basil started talking about the giant fern by the dining hall, and the flower boy regaled him with facts about the enormous plant. Basil's friend really was trying to listen, but he ended up focusing a lot more on the smile Basil was wearing instead.

All the horrible stuff that had happened earlier started to feel like the setup to a joke now. *What were they so concerned about, anyway?* The two of them were both going to be fine.

*Basil has such a good smile. The best one.*

The smile Basil was wearing was genuine, Sunny could tell. It was a beautiful thing, and a glowing reminder that their situation was starting too look up…

***Right?***

*So why did he feel so worried? Something wasn't sitting well with him*. The two of them are having fun right now... *aren't they?*

The pair reached the display bedroom door that had become so familiar and stepped inside their stolen sleeping space once again. Sunny walked inside first and stood at the foot of the bed before turning back to look at his friend, awaiting what Basil wanted to do next.

"I guess we should probably rest for a little while, huh? Turn in for the night?" Basil suggested, watching angry snowflakes batter violently against the window from the inky blackness outside.

"Yeah, I am pretty tired." Sunny admitted. *The two of them both looked at the bed in unison. Neither moved their legs.*

"So, uh… are you going to get in the bed, *or*..." Basil spoke, smirking with amusement.

"Are **you** going to get in the bed?" Sunny asked him.

*"I'm not tired."* The flower boy claimed.

Sunny didn't believe that for a second.

For whatever reason, neither of them would concede to being the first to lay down in the shared bed, so despite the still-frigid temperature of the room, the two boys sat down together beside the coffee table. Sunny took off his awkward new shoes. They chatted casually about the things that they had seen in the offices and the events that had transpired earlier. They smirked and laughed, Basil teasing Sunny again for stepping in raccoon feces and Sunny pointing out Basil's long list of criminal offenses that he had been diligently building upon since they arrived. Sunny had taken note of the fact that Basil's obvious need for rest had made him a bit giggly... and the boy would be lying if he claimed he wasn't attempting to take advantage of that.

*Sunny couldn't remember the last time he had this much fun.*

Basil finished laughing at Sunny's raccoon condemnations and wiped at the side of his eye with his knuckle.

As if in response, Sunny felt the bandage under his eyepatch itch a little. He subconsciously raised his hand and snuck a finger near the corner of his eye to scratch the feeling away.

"Is your eye okay, Sunny?" Basil asked, his eyebrows now bending in mild concern.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just had an itch." Sunny clarified. "I'm actually surprised that it doesn't itch more often…"

"I can itch it, if you want." Basil joked, although he seemed to have actually embarrassed himself with his own comical suggestion. His cheeks turned pink.

Sunny laughed. "I can handle this itch, I think…" he trailed off.

"Speaking of injuries, you told me earlier that you would show me the cut on your stomach later but you never did." The eyepatched teen absentmindedly complained as he lowered his hand back beneath the coffee table. "Can I see it?"

"*Oh, uh*... it's not that interesting S-Sunny, it's just kind of gross to look at. You don't want to see that, haha..." Basil deflected and faked a laugh.

"I like looking at gross things sometimes." Sunny persisted. "Maybe not as much as Kel, but I still enjoy them…"

*"Oh so you're calling me gross now?"* Basil protested, smirking at his friend.

"**You're** the one who called it gross, and I was talking about the cut!" Sunny laughed, raising his voice in a way that was very rare for him. He thought his voice sounded kind of weird like that.

"Anyway, let me see it? *Just a quick peek?"* Sunny insisted, leaning in towards his friend.

"Do you t-think that the kinds of people who purchase the furniture around here are like… aristocrats or movie stars or something?" Basil asked. "Who could even afford stuff like this?" The blonde faked a laugh again.

*Sunny blinked. What Basil just said was not at all related to their previous discussion.*

“I mean, maybe?” Sunny responded. “Maybe you could run a whole business that caters to super rich people…” he trailed off. *Wait, what were they talking about?*

*The topic they were discussing now was not particularly serious, but Sunny could feel the light conversation begin to take on a bit more tension again. Basil was dodging him on purpose.*

Basil continued saying something about outrageously expensive furniture but Sunny ignored him. The blonde was trying to divert the conversation away from himself. Sunny began to feel increasingly unsettled by his friend's behavior. *Basil persisted in his statements about the furniture…*

*“Hey uh... Basil?”*

Basil stopped talking, a strange look creeping across his face. “Yeah, Sunny? W-What is it?”

“Jokes aside, I really would like you to show me the injury you have…” Basil’s friend trailed off. “Is that okay?”

“Oh! D-Don’t worry about me, Sunny. It really is nothing bad, just a scratch.” Basil scratched the side of his nose as if that somehow emphasized his point. Sunny opened his mouth to speak again but paused before anything passed his lips.

*Strangely, Basil stood up even though the two of them were still having a conversation. Sunny got up alongside him, but was unsure why they were now standing. Sunny felt a chill run down his spine. He pressed Basil again.*

“You threw up earlier… and you’ve been picking at yourself since we got here.” Sunny pointed out.

“It’s really not a big deal.” Basil shrugged him off.

*“If it’s not a big deal then show it to me.”* Sunny countered, smirking at Basil’s coy refusal. That smirk didn't last long.

Basil laughed awkwardly and brushed a stray hair out of his face. Sunny stared at his friend, dumbfounded. *What is he laughing for?*

Basil's eyes refused to focus on Sunny any longer, his pupils awkwardly shifting from side-to-side. The blonde played with his fingers, as if he needed to keep his hands occupied. Sunny’s friend *visibly swallowed.*

*Basil was acting suspicious. Even more suspicious than he usually was.* Sunny’s growing worry started to build into a stabbing feeling of panic. *What was Basil being so secretive about?*

“Basil. I’m going to lift up your shirt, okay?” Sunny calmly said, stepping closer.

Basil's face twitched. His mouth formed into a nervous smile, then immediately flattened out before quickly returning to a smile once more.

*Sunny took another step forward.*

The blonde's eyes finally stopped zigzagging from side-to-side, and suddenly locked with Sunny's gaze as the boy approached him. Basil's face drained of color.

*The smile faltered again. His eyes widened slightly. Basil looked like a deer trapped in headlights.*

"***No***." Basil suddenly blurted out, stepping backwards. *No?*

Sunny felt another chill run down his spine. His burst of panic at Basil's bizarre behavior solidified into a feeling of looming dread. *What is wrong with Basil? Why is he trying so hard to hide this? He's not okay. Basil isn't okay. He's hurt.* ***Did I hurt Basil?***

"**Basil**. I am taking a look at your injury now." Sunny firmly stated. He took another step forw-

*Basil ran.*

Before the boy could even finish setting his foot on the ground, his friend turned and launched himself in the opposite direction, scrambling to escape the bedroom before Sunny could catch him.

Sunny almost couldn't believe his eyes, but Basil had suddenly dashed out on him. He stood there for a single second, dumbfounded, before hurriedly chasing after his escapee. Basil stumbled slightly across the carpet, accidentally slowing himself.

Basil tried to escape into the bathroom and Sunny chased him. Sunny nearly smashed his face into the door frame turning so fast.

Basil tried to shut the bathroom door but Sunny had already lodged his torso in the way. Basil smacked the wooden panel right into him.

*"**SORRY!** I'M S-SORRY!!!"* Basil yelped as the door collided with Sunny's head. Sunny didn't even feel it, he just forced his way inside. He locked eyes with Basil. His friend kept backing up, trying to put distance between the two of them, but Basil had put himself into a room with no exit.

"W-Wait Sunny it's- *I couldn't!"* Basil rambled incoherently. Sunny quickly continued moving forward, but his foot slipped on something wet that was on the floor. *Something red.*

His body collided with Basil's and Sunny grabbed his arm as they fell.

The two of them awkwardly toppled to the ground. Basil started rapidly scooting backwards but Sunny was faster. Sunny put his hand on Basil's shoulder and pressed him against the wall. Sunny was not heavy. If Basil really wanted he likely could have pushed his friend off,

but he didn't, seemingly incapable of bringing himself to resist any longer, either from guilt or exhaustion.

Sunny grabbed Basil's shirt and lifted it. His friend didn't attempt to stop him this time, submitting to the motion with a frightened look on his face.

*That's when Sunny saw it.*

*It was like an ugly red chasm, awkwardly stapled together with the brutal force of a massive set of abdominal stitches. The skin around Basil's stitches was purple and swollen, the entire wound looking as if it might split apart at any moment. Even* ***looking*** *at the wound was painful. Sunny's lungs told him to breathe, but he couldn't.*

"**D-Don't worry!** I know it looks really bad but it's not actually very deep at all..." The blonde nervously claimed.

*Wasn't that deep? This was a horizontal slice taken out of Basil's guts. Any additional amount of "depth" there could have killed him.*

"I j-just didn't want you to w-worry about it, your injuries w-were worse than mine and stress can slow the healing process! It was better for the both of us if I just-"

*The cut was actively trickling blood. It must have started bleeding down there recently. It was bleeding just a minute ago. Basil was sitting there, bleeding under his shirt while Sunny had been joking around like an idiot.*

Basil was feverishly listing out justifications for what he had been hiding but Sunny could barely hear him. There was a loud buzzing in his ears. Time seemed to slow down. *All he could do was stare at it.*

"-it d-doesn't ever b-bother me anymore so I had actually c-completely forgot it was there-" Basil rambled.

*He forgot? What did he mean he forgot? How the hell could someone forget to pay attention to something like this? They had antiseptic and Basil clearly hadn't even used it. How could he care so little about his own safety?*

Sunny's thoughts rapidly shoved each other back and forth in his mind, begging for his attention. He couldn't think straight. *Had he done this? No way.* Sunny had fought to get Basil off of him, he didn't try to slice open Basil's intestines.

*No. He wouldn't do that. He wouldn't.*

Basil seemed to somewhat pick up on what Sunny was trying to calculate from his cliff-faced expression.

"**Oh! N-No!** Don't worry, S-Sunny! *It wasn't you! You wouldn't-*"

Basil paused for a second before he seemed to realize what he had just admitted.

“**UM wait** I *mean* ***Sunny*** I-“ Basil struggled.

Sunny finally lifted his gaze from the wound and stared Basil directly in the eyes.

*“-I... I guess I kinda messed that part up, huh?”* Basil awkwardly joked.

***That’s not fucking funny.***

*Sunny grit his teeth. He felt lightheaded as the sound of blood rushed through his ears. His eyebrows furrowed together. This can’t be happening.*

Basil continued justifying himself in a panic, growing ever more desperate as he watched the increasingly furious look on Sunny’s face. Sunny still couldn’t hear him.

*Focus.*

“-I know this might be more upsetting because of the situation we’re in, but I promise that we can both-“

*Why was Basil still talking? Why was he acting like they were just having a normal conversation right now? Why was Basil acting like he was okay?* ***He was not okay.***

*Sunny could feel the room coming apart, the ceiling rapidly collapsing in on them. He could feel the creeping legs of a thousand spiders and hear the vicious snapping of an elevator door cutting innocent flesh in half. He was going to break into pieces right in front of Sunny, like he always did. It was happening all over again. It never ended. He had to do something. He had to save Basil.*

“-so you don’t have to w-worry about me now, Sunny-“

Sunny moved forwards and put his lips on top of Basil’s. The tip of his tongue slid into Basil’s mouth.

Sunny could have sworn that for a fraction of a second Basil had very quietly whimpered into his mouth before the boy pulled away.

**“W-W-WHAT ARE YOU D-D-DOING?!”** Basil yelped in terror.

*Sunny knew this was the wrong moment.*

But he desperately needed Basil to know. Maybe if Basil understood how Sunny felt he wouldn’t discard himself like this. Basil had to understand that having to watch him do this to

himself was going to kill Sunny.

Sunny scowled at him angrily, he couldn't help it. Basil pushed himself backwards so strongly he looked as if he had fused with the wall.

**"W-W-WHY WOULD YOU D-DO SOMETHING L-LIKE THA-"**

*Sunny quickly and wordlessly closed the gap between their mouths and kissed Basil again, forcibly silencing the boy with his lips.* Sunny's friend broke the kiss once more. Basil slapped his hand on Sunny's forehead and tried to force him backwards.

***"WAITWAITWAITWAITWAITWAIT-"*** The blonde turned his face to the side to escape Sunny's romantic intrusion. Basil's eyes were spinning.

**"You. Can't."** Sunny forced out, finding it incredibly difficult to speak.

*"C-Can't?"* Basil mirrored, his expression frozen in shock.

"Can't keep. Something like this. From me." Sunny squeezed out every syllable, straining to speak through the overwhelming flood of emotion.

*"But the- I-"* Basil struggled.

Sunny moved his face towards Basil's again.

"OKAY, OKAY, I GET IT-" Basil begged. Sunny stopped before their heads touched, staring his friend in the eyes.

*Sunny could practically see the steam coming out of Basil's hair. His friend looked as if he had been boiled alive.*

Sunny understood that Basil didn't like himself very much. He understood why that was the case better than anyone else. But he also knew Basil cared deeply about how Sunny felt, so maybe if he showed him those feelings Basil might start paying attention to his own safety. Sunny could make Basil take care of himself *by force.*

*It was a nightmarish, twisted solution.* An awful, horrible, selfish thing. But it was all Sunny had right now. If it could help Basil then it didn't matter. He couldn't lose him. Even if Basil didn't like him that way... Sunny knew that Basil wasn't the kind of person who would resent him for displaying these feelings... *was he?*

Sunny could still taste the other boy on his tongue. He knew he needed to say something, apologize for his terrible timing, say he was sorry for forcing himself on his friend like that, say anything at all, But he simply couldn't. The crushing weight of his actions hung in the air, but Sunny was yet to feel any remorse.

He just silently continued to stare at Basil, and Basil stared back. Time had frozen itself once more. Sunny was trapped within the confines of Basil's gaze and could find no way out. Those two curious, scared, worried blue oceans absorbed him entirely, with no hope of escape. *Sunny was drowning.*

It was as if every moment the two of them had ever spent together was now a question. *What exactly was Sunny trying to do right now?*

The silence persisted. Basil was breathing heavily. *Why was Basil staring at him like that? Stop. Stop doing that.*

Sunny felt his right hand subconsciously place itself on Basil's leg, further pinning him underneath his own weight. Basil didn't say anything, he just kept staring at Sunny, his eyes locked open wide.

*Sunny's face started drawing closer to Basil's once more.* Basil didn't move. Sunny could feel Basil's breath on his face. Basil seemed to wait for Sunny's next action, as if paralyzed by a toxic mix of insatiable curiosity and deep, horrified fear. *Whatever Sunny is doing right now, he shouldn't be.*

Why is he still moving? **This was wrong**. Basil got the point. He should just stop now. Whatever was unravelling itself inside of Sunny needed to be put back together before he destroyed his friendship all over again. He needed to apologize. **He needed to explain what the hell he was doing**.

*The boy hesitated.* Sunny was about to say something, but couldn't gather the thought before Basil suddenly pushed him over with both hands and stood back up, violently dashing out of the bathroom.

# Visitor

Chapter Notes

Hello again. Thank you all for the kind comments last week.

Every time I upload I think that *this time* nobody is going to still be around to read it, and every week I am once again surprised to find that is not the case.

Thanks for reading, have a nice day.

It's morning now. She had not slept at all last night, and the first growing tendrils of dawn were starting to break the sky. Didn't matter. She needed to get to sleep, regardless of what time it was.

Polly made herself a mug of warm tea to help her relax, but she didn't want to drink it. She just stared into the murky liquid and watched as it absorbed the pitiful rays of light barely managing to creep into the room through the curtains.

She began to wonder why she even submitted herself into this field of work to begin with.

Her own familial life during adolescence had been rather strained, and although she did not resent her family, she had always fantasized about what life might have been like if she was born into someone else's.

*Maybe that was part of the appeal.* When Working her job, one was allowed to take a sacred peek behind the walls people used to conceal themselves, and view with somber mind all of the mundane, melancholic, and beautiful little bits of humanity that their owners so frequently hid away.

Things that were special and wonderful, even if those people didn't see them as such. Precious things worth treasuring, that so seldom were.

Polly had considered that she might be, all truths told, a somewhat strange person. Few in her field could speak so enthusiastically of a career that was so frequently mired in physical labor, death and loss.

But they would've understood too, if they could've seen it. They would've understood if they could've taken a peek inside as well. If they saw him working quietly and diligently alone in the garden, they would have come to understand how precious it all was.

*Those things were gone now.* These walls around her now came together to construct what was nothing more than an empty prison cell, its last occupant having been swiftly executed

by the same uncaring world that had previously locked them inside. All that remained was someone whose job it was to clean up all the leftover strings of misery that remained inside.

Polly felt that misery creep into her bones.

*Should she just quit? Look for a career in something more conventional?*

*What if this happened again? Could she be able to take something like this a second time?*

She almost laughed to herself. *Happen again.* This was never going to happen again. There was only one boy like Basil in the world, and he was gone.

In the end, she couldn't help him. Despite all her efforts, all her silent struggling, Basil's own struggle seemingly outweighed hers by an order of magnitude, and her desire to assist that boy had ultimately amounted to nothing but awkward charity in his eyes.

He carried something terrible on his shoulders, and when asked if he needed help lifting that weight he would politely decline and gently smile, as if this outcome had long since become inevitable.

But it wasn't. It never was. She should have tried harder. She shouldn't have restrained herself from crossing his boundaries. She should have done and said anything and everything that could have changed this ending.

*What was the point of respecting his boundaries if Basil was dead?*

All the words that remained unsaid would haunt her until the day she joined him. She was the only person in the world who occupied a position close enough to have saved the quiet young man who wept alone in the garden, and she had wasted every opportunity in her fearful ineptitude.

Polly was used to helping lives end, but this was the first time she had been given the chance to save one, and she failed.

Why was she even-

*To her surprise, a knock comes at the door*. It's much too early in the morning for anyone to be knocking at her door under normal circumstances.

She panics. She feels a wave of sickening nausea overwhelm her. Polly doesn't want to answer it. Anything but that.

What if it finally happened? They had, after such a miserable wait, finally arrived to inform her that they had found a body. That it was over. That he really was gone. Neither she nor anyone else would be granted any final audience with him.

*It couldn't be. It couldn't end like this. It had to be some kind of mistake, or dream, or illusion that would simply fade away. Please.*

She creeps carefully towards the door and slowly twists the knob, her eyes aimed low to the ground. She expects opening the entrance to reveal a pair of apologetic civil servants on the other side, but instead she finds only a tall young man whose expression was woven with guilt.

He opens his mouth as if to speak, but hesitates, seemingly surprised that anyone had even answered the door at this hour... perhaps regretting the intrusion?

Polly realizes part of his restraint might have been her fault. Having not anticipated any visitors, she had forgotten to manage her appearance before opening the door. Her hair must have been a mess, her eyes were definitely red, she was inappropriately dressed...

She was so ashamed of herself that she might have considered asking the young man to come back another time, but she was too curious as to why he would be knocking at a time like this.

"Oh, it's you... Kel's brother... *Hero,* correct? How are you doing?" She inquires, inviting him to speak.

"*I'm...* I'm doing okay, ma'am. Do you, uh... mind if I come in for just a moment?" Hero asked.

"No, of course not. Not at all. Is there something I can help you with?" She responds.

"Actually, Polly... I have something important to ask you."

"Yes?"

Hero enters the cell and explains to her the situation he is in. He speaks of this desire he has, this calling that has infected him, to search for his missing friends. He admits that there is almost no chance they could possibly find them, but that sitting by and doing nothing as the world continued to turn was something he could no longer stand.

Polly understood that. She would have likely spent more time searching for Basil herself, but had little knowledge of where he would go, or where his friend would have taken him. Her ability to continue looking had been steadily crushed with every passing day.

She tells him that she understands.

He says that he has written down a short list of places that he and his old friends had visited a handful of times back when they were children, and although he knew the authorities were actively searching for the missing pair, he felt as if they needed to be trying as well, and that the locations listed were their best bet.

"I think that's wonderful, Hero." She quietly praises him. "But, *and please excuse my curtness...* why are you visiting to tell me these things at such an hour?" Polly inquires, incapable of restraining her curiosity.

The young man hesitates again. "Well..."

He tells her that they have no means of transport. That they need a vehicle to visit some of these locations, and that without a car they weren't going to be capable of doing much. He says their family only has one car at the moment, and that the odds of his parents allowing him and his friends to hijack it for a day or two were extremely low.

Hero seems as if he's finally about to ask, but Polly answers his question preemptively.

"You may take my car if you wish. I have no need for it right now, and I would love for you and your friends to take it and search for him."

*He backtracks a few times, insisting that he understands that it is a huge ask and a massive bother, inappropriate to be asking someone he has only known for a few days, that this was terrible timing, etc...* but Polly ignores him and smiles.

She asks him when he would like to take the vehicle. He sheepishly admits that he would basically like to get on the road as fast as possible. Polly tells Hero that she will clean out her car for him this afternoon.

He thanks her profusely and apologizes a few more times, but she only thanks him for coming and for expressing his concerns. It meant a lot to her.

Once he leaves, and the door closes once again, she is immediately struck with a feeling of intense heartache. *Didn't Basil know?* Didn't anyone tell him how much his old friends still cared for him? That they were so concerned and agitated by his absence?

***If only someone could have told him.***

After finally being fully exhausted by the constant struggle raging inside her mind, she returns to the couch futon and attempts to rest again.

*Once an hours worth of tossing around had passed, Polly finally falls asleep. She dreams that she's looking towards a pair of golden-haired people as they both sit alone in a field of white flowers, a young man and an old woman. Polly watches them from behind the trees, but knows that she can never get any closer than this. She wants to say just one more goodbye, but they are already too far for her voice to reach them. The petals steadily break from the flowers and float off into the air, in such number and density that it becomes difficult to see what is present in the space ahead of them.*

*The old woman starts to walk forward, but the boy stays still. She starts to drift away into the petals and stems, but he seemingly cannot follow either.*

*Polly hadn't noticed it at first, but there's a third person out there. One that was nearly impossible to see, as the figure was sprawled out upon the ground, obscured by the vegetation the other two were standing in. Polly can only just barely make out the shape of another boy's arm, reaching up and trying to grasp Basil from beneath.*

*There is a terrible sound in the distance as the ground begins to shake. The second boy tries to stand up as Basil begins to fall over. The rumbling causes the flowers to fly into the air even faster than they were before, as the torrent of petals makes it impossible for Polly to see the others any longer. She calls out to them, but can barely hear her own voice.*

The three figures fade away.

# Dandelion

They are both standing together in a field just off the side of the road. It was only the two of them today, the others having disappeared somewhere else, leaving an unconcerned Sunny and Basil behind to their own devices. Neither of them minded. Basil didn't know it at the time, but he eventually learned that he sometimes enjoyed himself more when it was just him and… *Sunny.*

Basil is telling Sunny some facts about dandelions. He sounds **really** stupid because of how overtly enthusiastic he's being, but somehow Sunny remains enthralled by his pointless ramblings. Sunny's friend is smiling back at him.

Basil has never had someone who listened to him like this. He's not sure how to manage the fuzzy feeling in his chest that only seems to grow stronger each day.

Basil had begun to notice that looking at Sunny had started to become kind of difficult. His friend would stare at him while he talked and talked, but for some reason Basil could no longer return his gaze. The blonde boy's eyes shifted from side to side, cheeks growing pink as he failed to gain any control over the massive grin on his face.

He's smiling so much that his cheeks start to hurt. Basil laughs a little but isn't even sure why.

Sunny doesn't laugh very much, but he gives his attention away very intently, and smiles back when you smile.

Basil is wearing a flower in his hair today, and Sunny has followed suit. Basil wonders if Sunny really likes wearing the flower on his head or if it's just something he does for… him. The blonde feels positive about it either way.

Having finally reached a natural conclusion to his excessive monologue about a common weed, Basil cheerfully insists that Sunny be the one to blow the dandelion seeds away.

Whereas Kel or Aubrey would have blown the entire thing to bits, Sunny blows softly and carefully. The seeds fall away from the stem and drift off into the air, catching a strong breeze and flying skywards.

It's really beautiful for some reason, Basil thinks to himself. He turns back to glance at Sunny's face but is unsure what to say, so he ends up just smiling at him. Sunny smiles back.

*Basil wouldn't mind at all if today just went on for the rest of their lives.*

*His stomach is dripping. It hurts.*

Basil stumbles to his knees, fighting to catch his breath in the shadows as droplets of his blood have started to decorate the floor beneath him. He's beginning to feel extremely dizzy, and the air seems to spin in circles around him. He had been moving too fast, and in too much pain.

He doesn't even know which room he's in anymore. He had been running and running, trying desperately to escape something that he couldn't understand. This huge building felt as if it could house a hundred people, but Basil is alone.

This is a position Basil has grown used to. He's all alone, but against the odds, something is still watching him. The entire world is a container made of glass, and every day he is on captive display. It's the punishment he secured himself for the actions he had taken.

Those shadowy eyes are staring right into his skull and those endless rows of teeth are biting into his flesh, but the worst part of all was the voices.

*Why? Why had Sunny done that?* Basil didn't understand. He felt as if the entire world had been flipped inside-out. His own insides were still screaming in agony, but Basil could no longer hear them. He sat alone in the dark, his panicked mind producing no coherent statements or observations. His silent madness continued unbroken until, at long last, the sounds inside him had congealed into a ceaseless torrent of words, spoken slowly and bitterly with the sound of his own voice.

The hidden things talked to him. Little bits of Basil were leaking out his stomach to tell him things he needs to hear about himself. Horrible secrets and impenetrable truths... Unthinkable ideas and unforgivable intentions...

**All the things Sunny said, the promises he made, the affection he showed, all of it was real. You were just afraid of acknowledging it because you're a coward. You convinced yourself that you knew more about his feelings than he did, because you're such an insufferable, self-centered person. You kept telling yourself that Sunny hated you, because believing that was so much easier. Now you're going to run away from him because you're weak and your own emotions scare you. That was your one chance to reciprocate those feelings, and you've lost it forever. Congratulations you fucking idiot.**

**Sunny liked you. He really, actually did and now you've ruined it. Your friend believes you think he's disgusting now. He touched you and you ran away from it. Pushed him over just so you could escape. Hid everything and dashed out because your trust in him had withered away.**

*Basil sobbed.*

The voices shifted and layered over each other, every part of Basil fighting to claim the most of his attention.

**Stop crying. None of that is true. He never actually liked you at all. Did you really believe that?**

**He only did that because he's worried you're going to kill yourself. Gee, I wonder why.**

**Sunny did it because he knows someone as useless as you has to be told just to take care of yourself. That someone else has to want you to be around for you to even find the ability to exist. That someone else has to tell you to stay alive or you won't.**

**Have you even SEEN the cut on your stomach? He's right.**

**He's going to be looking for you now. Sunny is going to be searching everywhere, stumbling and tripping and falling over himself. Maybe the next time he falls down he won't get back up again. Making sure he stayed upright was the only thing you could do, and you couldn't even do it like you were supposed to. He's going to be hurt over and over again, and it's all going to be your fault. You don't care about him at all. You don't care about anyone other than yourself.**

**You keep telling yourself these cute little lies about how everything you did was all for him but one little touch on the mouth and you're falling apart. Why are you always this pathetic? If you're always so ashamed of yourself then why do you never change? Four years.**

**He knows you have feelings for him and he's using them to keep you around because you yourself can't manage to do anything at all. You're completely incapable of even staying alive without him looking out for you. You're a parasite.**

*Is that really true? He did that because he's worried about me?*

***L a u g h t e r***

**Of course it isn't!**

**What's wrong with you?! Why are you still being so nice to yourself? Do you really think Sunny just did that because he cares about you? No, Sunny kissed you because he HATES you. He knows that if he gives you what you want it'll hurt you more when he takes it away.**

*That isn't true. Sunny isn't like that.*

**Did you really start to think Sunny would never end up punishing you himself? That after everything you did he would just let you off the hook? That you would just leave untouched on your own twisted terms?**

**He's acting like this because he knows you trapped yourself here with him. It had to have been you. You stole him away so you could live out your sick little fantasies. And you know what? He's actually going to humor the whole thing.**

**He's going to play along right until the last minute, so he can destroy you the way you destroyed him. He'll pretend to be your precious lost friend so he can get close enough to stab you in the back. Then he'll stare you dead in the face and tell you that he wishes you had hung yourself instead.**

*That's not true. Sunny would never do that.*

The voices fell silent for a moment.

**Yeah… you're right. It actually isn't that bad.**

**Sunny doesn't hate you. Sunny WANTS you. Didn't you see that look on his face? The way he had you up against the wall? He even put his hand down on your leg… *Wow*…**

*Stop.*

**Why the hell did you run away? Isn't this exactly what you've always wanted? Your punishment doesn't have to be all bad, you know… If Sunny wants that, then it would be okay if you gave it to him. That would be the right thing to do, after all.**

*Stop.*

**Sunny has been so stressed recently, and you can comfort him again, like you used to. You and him aren't kids anymore. You can really make it feel all better this time. It's not too late to fix this. Go back to him right now, and offer yourself up as a sacrifice. Fix what you ruined, *with your own two hands, hehe*…**

*SHUT UP!!*

**Remember the way he looked at you? Remember the way he tasted? Stop acting like you didn't like it. The boy you've thought about for years, and he's trapped alone with you…**

**and it's so cold right now… could it be any more *perfect?* You were handed the luckiest opportunity you could possibly ever have been given, and you're just going to hide here in the dark by yourself? What is *wrong* with you?**

*Shut up! SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP!!!*

**Sunny might not LIKE you, but he'd at least TOUCH you. That's already more than you deserve. Don't be greedy.**

**Remember how you pushed him away and he just kept coming back in for more!? Can you BELIEVE that?? Talk about persistent…**

**He's always been so pretty, too. Who could have guessed someone as perfect as him would have such terrible taste? You should go apologize for ruining what might have been his first kiss.**

**He'll say he forgives you, because that's what he always does. Then he'll do whatever he wants and you'll enjoy it… or if you don't you'll pretend to.**

**Once he's done, he'll toss you aside again and your little mission will finally be complete. You could finally watch him leave with some kind of twisted relief.**

**He doesn't care about you at all. He just wants to use you so he can have a tiny moment of control over the boy who ruined his life. He knows that you're a worthless piece of garbage who would allow him to do whatever he wants, and what teenage boy wouldn't take advantage of an opportunity like that?**

**That's what your precious best friend is actually like. He'll chop you up and use you, and you'll let him.**

**He's kept you alive for this long, shouldn't you return the favor? Our precious friend Sunny, giving us the tiny drips of water we need. You really are a wilted little plant. Go drink him up. His mock affection can be your last meal on death row.**

…

**What? You don't WANT to be with Sunny? That's fine. You still have at least one other friend, right? *One that's been thinking of you for a long, long time…***

**Do you want to go talk to her instead?**

*Please stop… please…*

The shadows twist and bend into a familiar form. Dark tendrils split apart to form her long, black hair. That hair drifts slightly in the wind, but she herself will never move again, her only motion being forced upon her by the uncaring breeze.

There's a beautiful sunset dripping down through the leaves, but nothing will ever be good again. All of the value has been suffocated out of the world with the choking grip of a knotted jump rope. The lap Sunny used to rest upon is now hanging lifeless, outstretched from the creaking branches. *No more reassuring words, kind hugs, warm cookies…* **It's over.**

He had never gotten to use all of the film she had gifted him, and now he never would. After all, what was there to take photos of now? Who would be there to sneakily steal his camera for a few quick shots of them and their friends? What good is a camera that has no one to photograph?

That rope would've stopped the air from entering her lungs, but her chest was now motionless. She's gone forever, and yet she will always, **always** be with Basil.

No one else knows it, but every table he sits beside now becomes a table for two; every one of his failed attempts to rest at night a twisted slumber party. She goes alongside him wherever he does, but she never says anything. Her fate and her legacy have both been chosen by Basil, but he is incapable of even speaking a single word to her now. If he really is sorry, she won't know it. Even if he says he would do anything to take it all back, she will never hear it.

*Not while Basil stands on this side of the curtain.*

**Look, it's Mari! You're always saying how sorry you are, aren't you? Go prove it. She's been waiting years for you, right there. Go apologize.**

*Basil can hear it, the sound of a taut mass of string blowing back and forth in the wind.*

**You tell yourself that you put her up there because you wanted to protect him, but that's a disgusting lie. You did it because you were scared. Not for him, but for yourself. You were so clawing and desperate to hang onto the one little thing you had. So desperate to keep someone who was either too pure or too hopeless to realize what kind of person you actually are.**

**You shouldn't have kept coming back to visit him. You should have just stayed home and talked to your plants. You could have told them all about how much you loved him, and how you ruined his life because you're a poison. Don't worry, none of them would have run away or abandoned you. They're firmly rooted in place, after all. Just like you.**

**Why did you struggle against it so much? You had survived alone for so long up until that point... why did you have to curse them? Look at how it all played out. Did hanging her help you hold on to anything? Of course not. *It all dripped away like his blood through your fingers...***

**You should have just turned back and walked home. You could have pretended you didn't even see it happen. Then, when everyone else had abandoned him, you could have come back. You could have been there for him while he was suffering. Maybe then he wouldn't have locked himself away from you. Maybe then he wouldn't have realized that you were a freak. You could have kept your sick charade going a little bit longer.**

**In the end, you know what is the worst part? He actually did come back for you. He's still trying to be your friend again, even now. After everything you did, he still came back. It's because he has nobody left now. It's because you locked him away from everyone and everything else. You won.**

**You're alone together, and he kissed you. *Aren't you happy?* It's like a dream come true, isn't it? Kill yourself.**

**You already know how it needs to be done. Just take out the knife in your pocket. It's even easier now than it was before. The cut is already there. It's already leaking. You just need to make it a little bit deeper.**

***Don't fuck it up this time.***

**What the hell are you talking about? Sunny needs you right now and you're thinking about just running away? He already lost EVERYONE else because of you and now you're going to abandon him too? Leave him alone to die in a place like this?? STOP BEING SELFISH FOR ONCE.**

**No, that's not true. You really do need to leave immediately. Right this second.**

**Don't you see what's happening inside your head right now? You are completely out of your mind. If you keep putting this off any longer, you're going to end up hurting yourself AND him.**

**YOU CAN'T LEAVE. IT ISN'T SAFE HERE. IF YOU GO NOW NOBODY WILL BE THERE TO PROTECT HIM.**

***Wrong.*** **The only thing in here that is a threat to Sunny is you. The only thing there is to protect him from is yourself. Leave. Leave while he still has one eye left.**

**You can still save Sunny. This is your last opportunity to go before you hurt him. If you leave now, there's still a chance that Sunny can survive by himself. Sunny saved you, and now you need to save him back.**

*I... I don't want to go. I'm scared.*

**Y o u**
**S h o u l d**
**B e**

**Why are you still hesitating? You already knew this was how it had to end! This is just sooner rather than later. If you don't take this opportunity now you're going to regret it.**

*But...*

**Are you seriously still here? What are you even left hanging onto right now? Was there really a microscopic particle of hope burning inside you this *whole* time? Did you seriously, actually think that you had a tiny fragment of a chance with him?**

***That Sunny would fall in love with the creepy kid across the street who turned his sister's corpse into a wind chime? Haha! HAHAHAHA!!!***

***THERE'S NO WAY OUT OF THIS***

# Somniphobes

*Basil is no longer in the room.*

Sunny sits up from the bathroom floor, and tries to convince himself that what just happened was real.

*Did he really just do that? Why did he think going that far was a good idea?*

*He was scared. He was scared he was going to lose Basil again…* ***and now he had****.*

*Why is he still sitting here on the floor?* He needs to go! Basil can't be running around like that, and **definitely** not alone…

Sunny quickly stands up again, but immediately feels himself overwhelmed with intense vertigo. Tiny colors and shapes appear in the corners of his vision. He almost falls back over immediately. He turns to face his shocked expression in the bathroom mirror, and sees that the bandage on his forehead has noticeably reddened. Sunny quickly looks away, trying not to think about the growing, throbbing sensations that are pulsating their way into his skull once again.

*Basil hit him with the door pretty hard.*

Sunny had been extremely lucky so far. He had collapsed into the soft snow earlier, and he had been able to largely avoid walking into walls and doorframes for the most part. As long as he stepped slowly around corners, none of his missteps hurt him too badly.

But all his luck had to run out eventually. Even if each additional blow to his head was insignificant by itself, that damage added up. Sunny wouldn't be able to just take a painkiller and continue ignoring the feeling in his brain if things kept progressing like this.

None of his injuries seemed to have split his skull in half, but the repeated shocks to his head were still unacceptable. He had been pushing his luck for a long while now, and that luck had finally been depleted at the worst possible moment.

Sunny took another step forward and felt the room tilting sideways. He immediately flashed back to the last time he tried to run out of the bathroom in a panic, and how he had ended up facefirst on the floor. He could not afford to end up like that again. Sunny crouched down for a moment, and waited to see if the spinning sensation was going to pass. Eventually, it slowly abated enough for him to stand back up again.

Sunny took hesitant, composed steps out the bathroom door. He looked around the advertisement bedroom. The door had been noticeably left ajar. Basil was nowhere to be found.

*The spinning sensation returns. This time, his vision also begins to blacken.*

Sunny is starting to lose consciousness either from the exhaustion, head trauma or blood loss... *but likely some combination of the three*. He needs to lie down for a moment or he's going to pass out. Sunny quickly lays stomach-flat on the floor and waits for his vision to clear again with his head resting on the ground.

*His body is heavy. It's nice to rest...*

**But he can't. He needs to get up again.** The feeling has passed well enough. Sunny puts both of his hands on the floor and prepares to push himself up, lifting his left leg to stand...

Sunny tilts his head to the side while starting to get up again.

*For some strange, unforeseen reason, he stops himself.* Being this low to the ground and looking from this angle, Sunny can see under the bed... and something colorful is under there. Something he had been looking for a while back. For a few seconds, Sunny doesn't understand what he's looking at... until his brain finally identifies the object. He didn't like the taste, but they made him nostalgic. He was surprised that Basil didn't end up getting more of them from the vending machine earlier since Sunny didn't really know more than one person who actually enjoyed drinking those... he figured the vending machine would be full of them. *It's an orange can.*

Sunny suddenly feels his nausea begin to grow once more. He scoots forward and reaches his hand to touch the beverage. *There's another can behind it. And another. All empty.*

*It turns out there had been a lot of Orange Joes in the vending machine. Someone else had just been drinking them.*

***That's really, really bad.***

Sunny's mind immediately tried to generate a justification that wasn't as bad as his initial impression. *Maybe Basil had just been drinking the Orange Joes behind Sunny's back because they tasted gross and Basil wanted to keep the better drinks available for him?*

*But Basil hated sweets. Hid them. He hid them.*

*Sunny tried to think back.*

Every single time he had woken up since they got here, Basil was always the one awake first. That was no big surprise, Basil had always been much earlier to rise than Sunny, and Sunny was the one who kept falling unconscious...

*But this was different.*

Had Basil slept at ***all?***

Sunny stood up again, his heartbeat rapidly building.

Sunny kept taking small steps forward, moving towards the door. His movements seemed relatively composed, but he himself was not. The thoughts in his head were running over one another so fast that he almost couldn't make sense of them.

*Basil was bleeding. He was bleeding and hurt and hadn't been sleeping.*

***He kissed Basil**. He kissed Basil over and over again and Basil pushed him away. What he had done was disgusting and controlling. Basil hated him now. Basil had run away somewhere in this giant building and there was no hope Sunny would have any way of finding him.*

Now that Basil hated him, Sunny really had lost everyone. He had ruined every single good thing in his life, and now struggled to even walk forwards.

It was horrible. A hopeless, terrible void that he had fallen into… *but it also felt strangely familiar*. Like a bad dream.

*Basil was gone, lost once more in a place that made no sense. Sunny was going to open an endless number of confusing doorways to nothing, until he would finally find Basil again. Then Basil would die.*

He tried to stop himself from panicking. It was not working.

Sunny stepped back into the hall, but something seemed wrong with the walls. *They tilted and squirmed…* the creases were moving. Sunny watched as the walls began to grow tiny hairs. Those tiny hairs then grew into tiny legs.

*What he is looking at isn't real. This isn't real, so Sunny is going to look away.*

He turns his head from side to side, looking back and forth between the statue staircase and the lobby, trying to determine which direction Basil might have taken, while ignoring the growing sound of hungry spiders falling off of the walls.

Attempting this task would have been pointless, but another familiar horror passes into Sunny's view.

*A tiny red droplet of fresh blood, visible on the tile floor.* Basil had moved towards the stairway, and he was bleeding. Sunny turns in that direction, and starts walking again, struggling not to dash forwards.

*He's dizzy. It's hard to stay upright.* Eventually, Sunny has no other choice and he has to keep his balance by placing a hand on the wall. He ignores the phantom sensation of spiders crawling over his fingers as he continues to move down the hallway. His vision blurs momentarily, but he blinks once and seems fine again. The tiny legs run in creeping motions all over his hand, falling off his wrist while trying to make their way across his arm.

*It's like Basil always said. Spiders were friends. Sunny wasn't afraid of spiders anymore. He wasn't afraid of their tiny hairs and tiny legs, their beady eyes or venomous fangs. This was*

*just in his mind, so the spiders wouldn't eat him. They wouldn't eat him the way they had eaten Basi-*

Incapable of restraining himself, Sunny finally recoils his hand from the wall, and nearly falls over as he begins to walk faster. Another droplet of Basil is visible on the floor. He approaches the staircase, which seems longer and wider than it ever had before. It stretches downwards for what looked like miles before finally hitting the ground. *Blood and vomit. Black hairs and wooden splinters.*

Sunny crouches down by the first step and begins to creep himself down the stairway with his hands on the railing. The spiders that were on his body had largely fallen off, but they had begun to silently follow his footsteps as he crept down the stairs.

Every step taken feels more difficult than the last. Sunny has to keep pausing as he descends, his legs are wobbly and he feels himself trying to fall forwards as he moves. He keeps stepping downwards. The monotonous motion dulls his panic somewhat... or it may just be that his body is growing too exhausted to keep that panic any longer.

He finally reaches the bottom before momentarily resting his body on the floor. He feels himself starting to lose his consciousness but immediately stands back up again. He looks at the mess of doors and halls ahead of him, and turns his head back and forth once more, scanning for little red hints on the floor. *Another one.* Sunny continues forward.

His head and legs feel increasingly heavy the further he walks.

With every droplet he grows closer to his friend, but he also grows more and more unnerved. Every little red indicator is a piece of Basil's life that was no longer inside him.

It was hard to approximate how much blood Basil had lost with how spread apart it all was, but it was clear to Sunny that his friend was in serious danger. *Why? Why had Basil been hiding this? Why had he been pretending he was okay for so long?*

Sunny's mind was scrambled. He thought about all the things that **he** had been hiding from Basil since they arrived. All the tricks and denials and deflections…

*Sunny had been afraid of Basil. He didn't want to be, and he didn't think that fear was rational, but he had been afraid nonetheless. His subconscious had been marked by the shears that had been plunged into his head, and he carried those fears with him. Those shadowy whisperings had poisoned his trust in Basil.*

Sunny considered how Basil might have felt about him. He disappeared for four long years, came back for a day only to abandon him again, and then screwed around town while Basil's life fell apart only to show up with their old friends at his bedroom door, as if to rub the nightmare Sunny had created into his face.

*He dove into the lake to save Basil, but he ended up needing to be saved instead. A depressingly reoccurring theme for Sunny.*

It was easy to imagine that Basil might trust Sunny even less than Sunny had trusted him. If he wasn't distrusted due to Basil's fear of him, maybe he was distrusted due to Basil's cloudless view of his incompetency. At this point he was better friends with the flooring than he was with Basil.

*Another droplet.* Sunny thought back to their interaction in the bathroom. Basil had RAN out. Basil was RUNNING with a wound like that on his stomach.

Sunny felt his panic starting to grow back even worse than before. The spiders dripped down from the ceiling and landed on his shoulders. He tried to brush them off but their long black legs were sticky.

*Sunny tried to walk faster, but his vertigo prevented him. He grit his teeth. He didn't have time for this… he needed to find Basil NOW.*

Sunny managed to calm himself down somewhat, if only so he could focus on steadying his legs. He thought about what finding Basil was even going to look like.

*If… **when** he finally found Basil, what was he even going to say?*

*Apologize.* He needed to say he was sorry. He needed to explain that he had done what he did out of fear and desperation. He needed to express respect for Basil's boundaries, which he had so thoroughly trampled.

He needed to tell Basil to stop hiding his wounds. Basil was seriously harming himself. Given the appearance of his cut, it would not surprise Sunny if Basil had given himself an infection from his own neglect.

*That didn't make sense. **WHY?** Why wouldn't Basil use the antiseptic they had? Was it just too painful to put on a stomach wound? Why wouldn't he just tell Sunny?*

*Tell Sunny. He told Sunny that it wasn't him. Sunny didn't make that cut. Basil did.*

Sunny was moving too fast. He was going to lose his footing like this, but he didn't care. He followed the broken trail of blood back into the upper storage room and fell to his knees. He scraped his palms on the concrete flooring, but immediately stood back up again and continued deeper into the room.

*It was dark. The pathway of blood had led in here, but Basil had NOT turned the light on.* If his friend was in here, Basil was in the darkness…

"**Basil!** Basil are you in here? I'm sorry… *I'm so sorry Basil… please come out…*" Sunny begged into the shadows, inspecting the walls in hopes of finding a light switch hidden somewhere in the blackness.

*Turns out, the light was unnecessary.* Sunny's eye adjusted, and with a wave of fear he took notice of a small, light-haired boy turned away from him, facing the shadows.

*The boy was kneeling near the ground, hunched over, and shaking.*

*"B-Basil?"* Sunny asked, stepping towards him and placing a gentle hand on his shoulder.

**Basil's body shot upward and he scrambled forward a couple feet before turning around, his face affixed with a frozen expression of terror.** That expression lessened slightly when he finally acknowledged Sunny's presence, but then reasserted itself again a second later.

*The reflection of the light from the other room danced within Basil's eyes as he stood opposite Sunny in the shadows.*

*The knife Basil had been carrying was not in his pocket anymore. It was in his hand. Basil's friend froze.*

Sunny didn't intend to, but he started to subconsciously take a step backwards. Basil immediately sheathed the item back into his pants and shook his hands.

"**N-No!** It's okay S-Sunny! **I wouldn't!** I w-would never leave you alone in here!"

Huh? *Leave him alone?* Hadn't he already done that?

…

"*I'm s-sorry I ran away Sunny.* I… I just, *you surprised me is all!* I had no idea that you were going to-"

"I'm sorry." Sunny cut him off. *"I shouldn't have…* I was panicking."

"**No!** It's fine! It wasn't…" Basil spoke over him, but trailed off.

*"Why didn't you tell me the cut on your stomach was bleeding while we were talking??"* Sunny demanded.

*"It's not that bad…"* The blonde mumbled.

***"Stop saying that!"*** Sunny growled. Basil flinched.

*The grey color concealed it a little, but Basil's long sleeve shirt was slightly wet at the bottom. Sunny's friend was still dripping onto the floor.*

**"Basil, sit down!"** Sunny insisted. *"You're going to…"*

Sunny trailed off because it didn't seem like Basil was even registering what he was saying. The gardener's eyes kept darting around the room as if the walls were closing in on them... *or as if something was hanging in the air.* Sunny felt his stomach drop as he watched Basil hyperventilate.

He shouted Basil's name again, and the blonde momentarily returned to reality. His panicked gaze refocused on Sunny.

*Sunny stepped forwards.*

*"Basil."* Sunny started. "Have you slept at all?"

"I slept onc- whence… WHEN you had taken the sleeping pill I…" Basil trailed off, losing focus again. Sunny watched another drop of blood fall from the bottom of his shirt. Basil's hand started to hover back towards his pocket.

*Sunny took another step forwards.*

"H-Hey, Basil? Do you want to sit down with me for a minute?" Sunny requested, trying to sound as composed as possible.

*Basil didn't respond. He shook his head.*

"Are you sure? I could really… use a break right now." Sunny insisted.

*Basil trembled.*

Sunny took a shaky breath. "Can you p-please come rest for a little while? *For me?"*

*Basil trembled a little more.*

"I don't like being alone…"

Sunny's head pounded. Basil let out a soft whimper. The blonde squeezed his eyes shut for a moment and then finally spoke again.

*"I'll sssleep a little lllater I j-just need to- just hhhave to…"* Basil voice slurred.

Basil's body suddenly began to droop awkwardly. He clearly wouldn't be able to stay conscious much longer. Sunny noticed his friend's eyes start to widen in a panic.

*Sunny watched in horror as Basil suddenly dug his fingers into the bottom of his shirt and pinched himself on his wound.* ***Hard.***

***"HEY!"*** Sunny yelled at him.

***"SUNNY IF S-SOMEONE IS IN HERE WE WON'T BE ABLE TO F-FIGHT BACK!!!"***

Sunny jumped backwards as Basil suddenly screeched out at him.

***"NONONONONONONO-"*** Basil mindlessly repeated as he slammed at the sides of his head with his palms.

Basil jammed his fingers into the bottom of his shirt again until it started to fill up with red. Tears streamed from his eyes.

Sunny dashed towards the blonde and sharply pulled Basil's wrist away from his stomach. Basil whipped his head around and looked Sunny directly in the face, his terrified blue eyes filled with a mindless desperation.

*"I CAN'T STAY AWAKE ANYMORE SUNNY I CAN'T-"* Basil was crying hysterically.

*"Can't-"* he forced out.

Basil's eyes rolled into the back of his head. The blonde slumps over, and Sunny only barely manages to grab his other arm in time before his body hits the ground. Basil slides out of Sunny's weak grasp, but his descent to the floor is slowed enough to prevent him from damaging his head

Basil is on the ground now.

*Focus.*

Basil is on the ground.

*FOCUS.*

The room is terribly silent for a moment. All Sunny can hear is his own panicked breathing and pounding heartbeat. It is extremely loud. In this moment, none of it *feels* real, but Sunny knows all too horribly well that it is.

Sunny tries over and over to regain his composure, and cannot. He keeps staring at Basil's body on the floor. His vision begins to fade again and he falls to the ground, taking deep breaths in hope that the influx of oxygen will prevent him from losing consciousness. Sunny's body shakes and his mouth tastes of bile.

He lies on the floor and is overwhelmed with the dizzying sensation that accompanies oneself when passing out. After an nightmarish handful of seconds march by, he is still awake and his vision returns once more. He needs to get up. He cannot lose himself again. Not now.

*Terrified, Sunny stands back up again and looks over his friend's motionless body. Basil is still bleeding.*

# Waiting

Chapter Notes

> Someday I would like to reach some fluff.

> I think one of the unfortunate side effects of the overly-protracted inner dialogue I write is that it makes certain high-stakes scenarios drag on for too long, which in turn makes it feel like Basil has been dripping blood for a few *years* instead of a few *minutes*. Someone needs to get him something to drink.

Sunny wasn't sure how long he spent standing there. It might have been only seconds, it might have been hours. All he was sure of is that the world was finally ending.

*At some point, he stopped begging someone who could not hear him to open their eyes.*
*At some point, he stopped shaking Basil's shoulders.*
*At some point, he managed to pull himself from the horror and remember where he was, what had happened, and what the hell he was actually doing.*

*He stopped trying to shake Basil awake again.*

Bringing himself back from the edge of absolute terror did not improve his mental state at all. Once he regained lucidity, he was only confronted all over again by the impossible nightmare that was now his reality.

*Basil has an enormous, weeping cut on his stomach.*
*They are alone in this building.*
*Basil is on the ground.*

**Basil is on the ground**. *FOCUS.*

**Why the fuck had he been shaking Basil?** *The bleeding. He needed to stop the bleeding.*

Sunny looked at the cut on Basil's stomach, but the bleeding had already stopped on its own. *How long had he spent just panicking? Why didn't he do this immediately after Basil passed out?*

*If Basil died now it would be his fault. He killed Basil. She was on the floor. He's on the floor now. Sunny killed him. He would put him back in the bed upstairs, but he would never wake up.*

Sunny tried to calm himself down again, but that pointless struggle almost seemed to make his panic worse. He wouldn't calm down, but he could just barely manage to focus his mind. *There had to be something he could still do. He needed to focus on what actions he could take to fix this.*

Sunny moved Basil's unconscious body by his shoulders, over towards the enormous metal pillow racks the two had been joking around with yesterday. Sunny was weak, but Basil was thin and light. Sunny put a pillow under Basil's head, and felt himself regain just a tiny bit of his focus once more. He threw a thin blanket over him. When he was like this, it almost seemed as if Basil was having a nap. That's what Sunny told himself, even though he knew that was not the case. The lie helped him stay sane.

Basil's breathing was steady. His heartbeat was normal. The bleeding was still paused.

Sunny had to stop looking at the cut. Every time he did, his vision would start to fade, and he could feel himself trying to slip away.

Sunny tried to hold back the urge to vomit. He lied down on the floor next to Basil's unconscious body for a moment, trying to avoid passing out as well.

*It this how Basil had felt? Is this what Basil went through every single time Sunny's mind had left him? Sunny had just been doing* ***THIS*** *to Basil, over and over again?*

*If Sunny hadn't kissed him, none of this would have happened.*

Sunny felt himself hyperventilating. He stood back up again and started poking around random objects in the room, trying to trick himself into feeling like he was looking for something more that could help Basil. There wasn't anything.

***E x c e p t***

Sunny glanced back over at Basil, and felt a surge of nausea run through his body. A terrible realization overcame him, digging its shadowy hands into the primal depths of his mind. Sunny took a shaky breath, and his legs began to move by themselves, as if the boy was merely a helpless puppet to that growing fear.

*In the corner of the storage room sat a long, metal rod used to grab objects from tall shelves, as well as an abandoned roll of what appeared to be electrical tape.*

Sunny started walking towards both, and felt himself begin to dissociate as he moved forward.

He picked up the tape.

*This was just a dream, so what he was doing was okay.*

Sunny used another pillow to prop Basil up slightly, so he was somewhere between laying down and sitting up.

Sunny pulled Basil's arms towards one of the four steel rods that made up the frame of the industrial storage shelf, and crossed his hands behind the cold metal. Sunny tried to ignore the scars on Basil's wrists as he taped them together. *He layered it on, over and over and over...*

*It's okay, because none of it is real. Sunny would probably wake up soon.*

Sunny removed both knives from Basil's pockets. The army knife he slid back into his own, and the serrated knife he threw across the floor and into the darkness. Maybe he should have kept or hidden it, but simply touching the blade at all made him feel like he was about to go insane. *He just wanted it gone.*

Sunny's missing eye throbbed.

*The boy wished Basil would wake up, if only so he could tell his companion that he had ended up being right all along. This place really was hell.*

Sunny finally stopped applying tape to his friend's hands, and stood back up, looking over the results of his actions. *Basil was restrained now. Sunny had to do this.*

*Basil had seriously lost it*. He had clocked Sunny with the door and injured his stomach. That cut was not just a physical expression of self-hatred, but a serious attempt to end his own life. That wound had been present on Basil since they had arrived, and he had not mentioned a single time how bad it really was. He had **deliberately** and **repeatedly** obscured those stitches from Sunny's view. *Sunny thought back to the chill he felt when he found Basil had taken the knife out of his pocket while he was alone in the darkness...*

Through not just neglect, but physical action: *Basil had shown that he was a threat to himself.*

*Sunny was sure that this wouldn't last long.* Basil would wake up again, he would be lucid, they would talk through what just happened, and Sunny would untie him. It was going to be fine. The black-haired dreamer needed only make sure that Basil couldn't sneak away again while the blonde's friend was out cold, as there was no way Sunny was going to be able to keep his own consciousness from escaping for much longer. His body was exhausted, and so was his mind.

*Basil would forgive him, wouldn't he?*

Gravity pulled down on Basil's unconscious form, and the boy slid down the pillows slightly as if he was an empty doll.

*Sunny felt like he was going to scream*. Maybe he actually did, but he wouldn't remember it anyway. He finally laid himself on the ground, and felt his mind give up on the constant struggle. The boy joined his friend on the floor.

---

Basil rolled the stone back and forth in his palms. It was easy to roll like this given how rounded it was, and the gentle texture rubbing against his skin relaxed him as he toyed with it... *or at least it could have, if his the voice in his head would have just stayed quiet.*

Sunny had gifted his friend a particularly-smooth stone that he found in the water at their lake hangout spot after Basil was caught admiring said object when it was in the boy's hands. This rock must have travelled to Faraway from its own far-away place, as the years and years of rushing water that had carried it here from its origin appeared to have worn its sharp edges down into a pleasing, bulbous form.

*Kel said he thought it looked like a fat kidney bean, but if you rotated the object on its side, it almost looked like a heart. A heart filled to the edge of bursting.*

Basil tried not to look at it that way. It hurt too much to think about. Sunny definitely didn't see the rock's form like that. He didn't see these stupid, excessively-sentimental shapes in random objects the way Basil did.

Basil had accepted the stone after Sunny caught him looking and then kept insisting he take it, but Basil had never wanted Sunny to give him something like this. It just made his chest hurt to look at.

*It just made the nasty buzzing in his head even louder than it was before.*

Sunny gave him an item like this, and then immediately walked off to help Aubrey with something. Whatever it was they were doing over there by themselves, *Aubrey sure seemed to be laughing a lot.*

*Basil should like girls. He should like a girl the way Sunny does.*

Maybe his friend didn't know that he had done it, but it was as if Sunny was playing some kind of cruel joke on Basil.

*Sometimes, Sunny was just mean like that.*

Basil thought the gift Sunny had given him was a somewhat-insensitive gesture at the time, but he had no idea how much objects and memories such as these would truly come to haunt him in the years that followed.

---

The sad little gardener sometimes grows tired in the afternoons. He daydreams about his past, and about his empty future that seems more and more conclusive with each passing day. Every day has been a bad day for him recently, but some of them are worse than others.

*On the best days, it's all hopeless.* His friends are never going to forgive him, and nothing will ever fix this. There's no point in continuing to trouble himself with these thoughts anymore. It really is over. If he strains hard enough, he can almost imagine what it will be like to finally let go of everything, to leave this behind without regret... for all the petals around him to finally close, and the whole world to silently turn away its gaze as Basil quietly withers into an empty husk.

*It hurts.* It's so, so painful... but at least he won't have to struggle anymore. A terrible conclusion grasps him entirely, without any chance of escape or rescue.

On most days, he thinks of them. He falls asleep in the afternoon and is haunted by angry, hollow shells of the people he has hurt. They crowd around him and demand the truth. They want him to admit to the monstrous actions he'd taken, and punish him for those actions with equal force.

The three of them demand that Basil open his mouth and tell them what he had done, but the boy keeps refusing. *He couldn't do it... he had made a promise.*

His silence is itself an unforgivable response. His friends begin to punch and kick and beat and scream at him. The horror should shake him awake, but Basil's nightmares persist in spite of his suffering. Maybe it's because he knows this is what he really deserves that his hellish dreams continue.

*They tell him how they really feel about him. How they always knew there was something wrong with him, and that all of this was their fault for having let him get so close to her in the first place. They never liked him at all, they just pitied him for being so weak and incapable. So useless and dull.*

Their judgement feels as if it lasts a lifetime, but his friends eventually fade away. Basil covers his face in his hands, and when he removes them again the dream has shifted. He's standing behind his front door, awaiting the inevitable knock from a figure who is approaching from the other side. He already knows who it is, because it's never been anyone else.

He dreams of Sunny returning and knocking on his door. *He's finally back. Sunny has finally returned to tell Basil the truth.*

Sunny isn't cruel or spiteful like the others. His words aren't sick with anger or steeped in burning hatred. When he speaks, his voice is calm and cold, sad and lifeless. His eyes are dead... almost devoid of emotion, but he speaks with a tone of gentle disgust. Sunny tells Basil that he only came back so he could finally say all the things that he needed to get off his chest once and for all. The things that his friend needed to have spelled out to him.

*He tells Basil that he was always boring.* That his constant, stuttered ramblings were stupid and tiring, and that it was selfish of him to always continue talking on and on like that when it was so obvious that he was annoying everyone else.

He tells Basil something that the boy had already long suspected: *the others used to frequently speak of him behind his back*. They used to insist to Sunny that they should just stop hanging around with Basil already, but Sunny said he stood up for him every time. He told them that he didn't want to abandon Basil, because Basil wasn't so stupid or selfish that he was entirely irredeemable. He just needed someone to help him. Sunny told them that despite all his pitiful flaws, he still believed that Basil was, deep down, a good person.

Sunny apologizes for having misjudged him like that.

Sunny tells the blonde that he finally told them all the truth about her, and that they forgave him for what happened. They'd never forgive Basil of course, but Sunny's life would still move on without him, and Basil could take solace in that. He didn't need Basil to keep the secret anymore. *He didn't need him.*

Sunny just stopped by to set him free. Basil asks if he could have one last hug goodbye, but Sunny steps backwards and insists that it would only make things harder for the both of them.

*It's pathetic and evil... but Basil starts to break down. He begs Sunny for it.* ***Please... please...*** *One more hug and he'll be okay. One last embrace and he can accept being left behind.*

Sunny scratches his head in discomfort. He only stopped by for a minute... he's actually quite busy right now. He turns away from his accomplice and begins to walk back towards the street. Their other friends are waiting for him on the sidewalk, each glaring at Basil as he trembles pitifully in the doorway. Sunny joins his friends and their faces light up one by one as he approaches, all very proud of him for getting the closure that he had so badly needed for so long. The tumor had finally been cut out, and Sunny could finally begin to heal. Aubrey plants a soft kiss on his cheek, and the four of them disappear around the street corner, never to be seen again.

*Then Basil would wake up*. He would awaken sick to his stomach, and have to quickly run into the bathroom before he throws up in his bed. The boy would empty his intestines and then slide down to the ground. The tiny gaps in the tile flooring would collect his tears for him as he wept.

*This event was not unusual. Whenever Basil started to feel as if he was finally starting to grow numb to what he had done, his nightmares returned to punish him. They would ensure that Basil could never forget, not for a second.*

Those were the bad days. On the worst days, the dreams are peaceful and quiet. The blonde only falls into such a deep sleep when he has the house to himself, when Polly has taken his grandmother out for fresh air and has allowed Basil to stay behind and spend some time alone.

In the worst dreams, Sunny knocks but the door is already unlocked. He invites himself inside and finds Basil on the floor in the living room, crying over the images in his photo album that SOMETHING had ruined. Sunny is immediately concerned by Basil's distress. He runs over to Basil's side and takes his friend by the hand.

*In the worst dreams, Basil's friend is soft and smiling, gentle and kind, quiet and worried...*

He asks Basil what's wrong.

Basil tells Sunny about the awful nightmares he's been having about him and Sunny just laughs. *That's ridiculous.* He would never say things as horrible as that, and definitely never to his friend. Sunny tells Basil that it's okay. *It was just a dream*. He has finally come back for him, and he would never leave his side again. Sunny embraces him firmly yet with a gentle grasp, and runs his hand through Basil's hair.

*Everything is going to be okay now.*

Then the dream concludes. Basil wakes up and screams into his hands. He mindlessly claws at his face and frantically pulls at his hair, desperate to force his mind to leave him alone, if only for a moment.

*It doesn't work*. It will never work, and so Basil resorts to more effective methods. He slowly draws a blade across the frequently-travelled roads that sit atop his wrists, and punishes himself once again for his constant inability to accept reality.

This was what Basil's world was like. The insidious torment that his mind would force upon him had begun to make Basil dread sleep with a trembling fear, but the longer he ran from it, the worse the nightmares would be when he finally broke down from the lack of rest.

This was the cycle that would continue unending, over and over, until the day Basil died. Grandma was going to be leaving soon, and Basil would follow shortly thereafter. He had no reason not to go with her. There was nothing to look forward to, nothing to care about, nowhere to run, no one to love...

**Nobody would be coming to save him**.

*Then Sunny left his house again.*

He shut Basil out but then finally returned. Sunny was drifting around Faraway like a sad little ghost. A ghost that had seemingly come to haunt Basil, whether intentionally or not.

But he really was back. He seemed empty but it was him. For but a brief few moments, Basil began to feel as if this could all still be fixed... fixed well enough, anyway. He gave Sunny his old photo album. *Sunny actually accepted it...* and Basil felt the long-forgotten warmth that would emanate from a tiny flicker of hope.

That was his mistake.

Sunny drifted through his front door only to announce that he was moving away forever, leaving Basil once more to cry by himself in the darkness. It was the most obvious outcome, but it still hurt Basil more than he believed was possible. He had thought that, at this point, after everything, that he had felt as much pain as he could possibly experience, but every passing day sought to correct him with increasing cruelty.

*Aubrey pushes him into the lake.* As water tries to flood into his lungs, he begins to wonder if this is it... if there wouldn't be any more tears to shed after this.

*Then Hero pulls him out.*

**As if this world would've let him leave before the final act. No chance.**

Grandma finally falls behind the curtain. Basil came to visit her, but never got a chance to say goodbye that day. She had already said her tender, aching, heartfelt goodbyes to Basil so many times over in the days that preceded this, but the fact that she was incapable of speaking to him right before she disappeared forever was something that would have haunted Basil for the rest of his life, but the rest of his life would not be long. He had finally, after so much pain and misery and loss... *reached his limit.*

*Sunny came back **again***. Basil's old friend reappeared in the blonde's house with their friends in tow, as if Basil's nightmares were finally becoming reality.

***This is it**. This is the worst part. There was no escaping it. It's exactly the same as it always was...*

*...except he hadn't told them yet. Sunny shouldn't tell them. He couldn't. it wouldn't go the way that Basil had hoped. Nothing ever did.*

Basil had to save his friend, and so he would once again resort to something unforgivable. Basil was leaving and Sunny would have to come with him... it would hurt his friend less this way. *He was so, so sorry... **but this was the only thing he could do for him***.

*Basil took away his eye, and Sunny fell to the ground.*

That should have been the end, but it wasn't. Something unthinkable happens next. Basil wakes up in a hospital bed. He opens his eyes and sees a soft smile that he had not seen for such a terribly long time.

Every time Sunny left his friend's hospital room, Basil waved goodbye. He waved goodbye to a boy he would never see again, only for that same boy to reassert himself the next day as if dragging this whole process out as long as possible. *It hurt...* but Basil was so, so happy to see him again.

*He was smiling. Basil had almost forgotten what it looked like. The boy smiled back. He had almost forgotten what it felt like.*

Then he gave back the photo album. Sunny gave back the photo album and told Basil that horrible, horrible lie that he shouldn't have said. That awful, painful thing.

He told Basil that he was leaving, but that he would one day come back again like he always did. All Basil had to do was keep waiting. *Keep waiting and waiting and waiting and waiting...*

...as if he really was coming back. As if Sunny wasn't going to eventually forget about him after he moved away. As if he didn't resent Basil for ruining his life and trying to kill him. It was so mean that Basil almost couldn't take it.

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*He can't fall asleep right now.* He doesn't want to. The nightmares have been getting worse than ever... and the two of them aren't safe here.

Basil kept condemning himself but he still couldn't chase away the possibility that there was someone else. He had sworn he saw someone in this room earlier. It might have just been his sleep-deprived mind playing tricks on him, but he had felt so sure it was real.

The hateful voices push him further and further towards leaving Sunny behind, but he couldn't do that now. Even if he himself might be a danger to Sunny, it didn't change the fact that Basil would never leave him alone in here.

Basil tried to steady his breathing and ignore the screaming in his mind. Sunny kissed him. Kissed his friend after everything that had happened... *after everything Basil had done.*

*Sometimes, Sunny was just mean like that.*

# Cat Stuff

The three of them were packed into Polly's car. Hero was keeping his hands planted firmly on the wheel, his brother was riding shotgun, and Aubrey sat behind him in the driver's-side backseat.

Hero had told Polly about his desire to search for Sunny and Basil, but that none of them had a vehicle. She agreed that the three of them could take their car, as no one else currently needed it at present. Hero had expected Polly to calmly reject his outrageous ask, or at the very least that she would be much harder to convince, but something about their quest seemed to resonate with her. The three of them left Faraway that afternoon, the entire experience feeling quite surreal. Polly let them have the car, on the promise that they each inform their parents about what they were doing before they left.

*Hero felt awful. He hadn't exactly kept that promise.*

"Mom's going to be so pissed at us." Kel said with a goofy grin on his face.

"Yes Kel, I know. Can you please stop bringing that up..." Hero complained. Kel laughed.

"I can't wait to see the look on her face when her precious goodboy Hero admits to snagging a neighbor's car to go on a trip to the beach without telling her! HAHAHA!!" Hero's sibling continued laughing obnoxiously.

Hero tried to ignore his brother, but Kel was right. *They were so screwed.*

He switched lanes after letting his blinker linger for what felt like an hour. Hero considered himself a pretty good and rather responsible driver, but he was a bit out of practice, and it felt weird to drive someone else's vehicle. It was another windy day, and he had to keep turning the wheel to prevent the vehicle from drifting while they were on the highway.

Hero liked public transit better. He didn't have to be in control of the vehicle, and everyone on the bus was so nice to him. Mari had always been the better driver out of the two of them anyway, even if neither had much time to practice before she was gone.

Kel started trying to solve a crossword. Not exactly his typical form of entertainment, but after a half hour of trying to get the other members of the vehicle to play eye-spy with him, Kel had to figure out a way to amuse himself instead, and that spare newspaper was seemingly the only thing Kel could find in Polly's car. Hero wished he had just brought a book.

Aubrey had been doing surprisingly well at ignoring Kel now that they were all trapped in an enclosed space together, but her patience had finally broken. Whether Kel had intended this outcome or not was unclear to Hero, but his brother had definitely gotten her talking.

"Twelve boxes... 'birds that can fly backwards' *What?"* Kel pondered aloud. "Do birds fly backwards?" He squinted and started penciling in the boxes with his improvised response.

*Backwardbird.*

*"**Hummingbirds**."* Aubrey corrected, rolling her eyes.

"That doesn't even count." Kel rebutted. "Hummingbirds are just weird bugs."

"*BUGS?* They have beaks and feathers, Kel." Aubrey stared at him. "Humming. **bird**."

"No way. It's like how a sea lion isn't actually a lion." Kel argued. "Hummingbirds are actually just hummingbugs." Hero wasn't sure if he was serious or not.

*"Oh my fucking god..."* Aubrey mumbled and rubbed her forehead with her palms.

Something about listening to the way they argued put Hero's mind to ease. Certain things just never changed. He smiled and tried to focus on the road. *Sorry Aubrey, the beach was only one more hour away...*

Aubrey and Kel finally concluded their crossword struggle after a handful of prolonged disagreements. A few minutes past. Kel dug around in his bag, apparently searching for something.

Aubrey was once again doing her best to ignore him, put she seemingly couldn't help but comment on a tasteless orange pair of swim trunks that Kel had included in his personal luggage.

"**Kel**. We aren't going to the beach for *swimming*." Aubrey glared at him.

"Yeah, but what if Sunny and Basil took an emergency escape boat offshore? You have to start learning to come prepared, Aubrey." Kel joked. *Aubrey scowled with rage.*

*"How did you get even dumber as you aged? How have you even survived this long?"* Aubrey asked with incredulous annoyance.

*"Mean."* Kel complained, smiling.

Hero chuckled. At this point, Aubrey inserted earbuds into her head and stared out the window, finally having found a way to effectively repel her old friend's constant prods for attention.

Kel had to give up. Hero smiled and relaxed in the newfound quietude. This was a good opportunity. His gaze bounced downwards to the soft drink straw that was standing tall in the cupholder beneath him. He had been trying to ignore something of his own, but that need had finally grown too much to bear in continued silence.

"Hey Kel, can you uh... give me a hand?" Hero implored Kel to come to his aid.

"Huh? With what?" The boy responded.

"Can you lift my drink for a sec? I'm drying out over here, bro. Heh, heh." Hero sparkled.

"*What?* Just pick it up yourself." Kel replied, brows bent in confusion.

"You're supposed to keep two hands on the wheel at all times, Kel." Hero informed his brother. "And this isn't even our car. If anything bad happens on this trip we're going to be in even hotter water than we already are."

"You really can't just lift one hand and pick up your own drink for two seconds?"

"It's windy!" Hero asserted. *"C'mon, Kel... "*

"I thought people went to college so they could come back *smarter*-" Kel complained, but he lifted the drink for his brother. Kel did him a solid and gave out some liquid.

*Hero quenched his growing thirst while maintaining a firm gaze on the road ahead. Mari would be so proud of him. Hero could tell from his peripheral that Kel looked annoyed.*

Finally having satisfied their pilot, Kel placed the drink back into the cupholder again.

"Thanks, bro."

*Then Hero's phone starts ringing.*

"Oh man... *Mom is calling."* Hero's arms tensed up. Kel laughed.

"So are you going to pick that up or what?" Kel asked his older brother, teasing him. "Need to pull over first?" The boy smirked.

"Why don't **you** pick it up, Kel." Hero suggested.

"Can do-"

To his brother's surprise, Kel did pick up Hero's phone and casually flipped it open. *Uh oh. Maybe this was a mistake.*

*"You've reached Hero's phone, Kel speaking."* The boy introduced himself. Hero braced for the ugly news.

"Hero is busy right now, can I take a message?" Kel itched at the side of his nose.

"I can't, he's got **both** his hands full." Kel rolled his eyes and made a face. Hero squinted at his brother.

"Also, can you speak a little louder please?" Hero's brother requested that their mom speak up. *What the hell did he think he was doing??*

The conversation continued. Kel didn't speak for a while.

"No, we're in the car right now." Hero felt his heartbeat increase. His stomach clenched in preparation for maternal impact.

"*What?* I mean... I don't think so. I can barely hear you, actually-" Kel stopped.

Hero raised his eyebrow. *Interference, perhaps?* Kel went quiet once again. The seconds slowly ticked by.

Kel nodded his head. "I understand." Hero's brother confirmed... *something.*

"Rodger that." Kel confirmed again. Hero's brother leaned forward in his chair and scratched himself. Hero felt like something awful was about to happen. Another few seconds passed without Kel saying anything.

"No, seriously. I got it, I promise. You can count on me..." Kel started.

*"**Ow**. Meow, I sure love catnip."* Kel impersonated a talking cat.

Baffled beyond belief, Hero's gaze finally broke from the road outstretched before him and his head turned so that he might stare his brother in the face, mouth hanging agape. To Hero's unending confusion, **somehow**... *Kel actually looked deadly serious*.

Kel finally lowered his brother's phone and closed it, seemingly terminating his feline discussion. Hero could have sworn that at the end of his call he had heard someone yelling.

There was a brief moment of terrible silence.

*"Kel."* Hero spoke in as composed a manner as he was currently capable of. *"What the hell was that?"*

"A pretty weird call." Kel admitted.

"Did you just ruin us both?"

"Ruin us? No? Also this trip was *your* idea..." Kel deflected.

"*Okay, okay*... just... tell me. What did mom say?"

"That uh, wasn't mom on the phone."

"What? So who was calling?"

Kel did not respond.

"I can't tell you." Hero's brother stated.

"*Huh? What?* What do you mean you can't tell me?"

"It was important, um..."

Kel's eyes shifted to the side, trying to come up with something.

*"Cat... stuff."*

The interior of the vehicle was silent once more.

"So..." Kel's brother began.

"Let me clarify this..."

*"Someone just called **me** on **my** phone to talk about **cat stuff**, and you can't tell me who it was?"*

*"Yes."* Kel confirmed.

"**Kel, quit messing around!** *Did mom call or not??"* Hero demanded he talk like a normal human.

"No-"

"Are you pranking me right now? Did you really just call me on your own phone? This is just the voice changer all over again?"

"*Voice changer?"* Aubrey inquired from behind him, seemingly having removed her earbuds at this point.

"When Kel was younger he used to call our home phone from outside the house and use one of those dumb voice changer toys to try to pretend like he was someone else. He did it all the time." Hero stated.

"Allegedly." Kel maintained plausible innocence.

"He kept calling Sunny's house and trying to get Mari but he just kept bothering their parents instead." Hero continued. Aubrey smirked.

Kel laughed. *"They thought I was trying to sell them something!"*

"I can't believe you're still doing stuff like this..." Hero chastised his brother, shaking his head.

"So immature." Aubrey agreed.

*"Hey!"* Kel complained at their shared willingness to gang up on him. "I can show you my call history and prove it wasn't me." Kel flipped open his own phone and held it out in front of Hero's face.

"**Driving**! I'm driving!" Hero complained.

"Please don't get us all killed, Kel. It isn't worth it. Just continue using Hero's phone to keep in touch with your cat friends and I promise you could find a lucrative career as a pet groomer." Aubrey made fun of him. "That line of work would probably teach you some great tips you could try using on yourself..." She smirked.

*"Wow!"* Kel complained again, but Aubrey's earbuds had already been inserted into her head once more, her gaze firmly glued to a variety of pre-selected playlist options. She leaned back and closed her eyes, seemingly attempting to get some rest before they arrived at their destination.

"You shouldn't keep lying about stuff like this, Kel. It really is time to cool it with the ridiculous pranks." Hero chastised his brother.

"I'm not pranking!" Kel asserted. The boy tried to scowl at Hero, but his eyes kept dashing over to the tired girl in the backseat for some reason. Kel seemed like he was repeatedly checking if Aubrey really wasn't listening anymore. Hero raised an eyebrow.

Kel leaned to the side in his seat so that he would be more difficult to see from Aubrey's angle and then rotated his torso to face Hero, snapping his fingers to steal his brother's attention from the road ahead of him.

"Geez, Kel! *What?"*

Kel didn't say anything in return. Instead of responding, he started doing charades with his arms. He kept pointing towards the backseat and mouthing something while pretending to talk into a phone. Hero tried to read his brother's erratic mouth movements.

*It*
*was*
*about*
*Aubrey.*

*About Aubrey? What? Someone had been calling about Aubrey?*

"Kel, what the heck are you talking ab-"

Kel held a finger up to his lips and glared at Hero, his eyes repeatedly darting to the backseat to check if the girl in question still had her eyes closed.

*I'll tell you later.* He mouths.

*Why are we being so secretive?* Hero mouths back.

*I'll. Tell. You. Later.* Kel reasserts his previous claim more slowly so that it fits into Hero's skull.

*Why won't you just tell me now?*

Kel doesn't really say anything else. Hero's brother just starts mouthing random expletives with a stupid grin on his face until Hero gets the hint and redoubles his focus on the road

ahead.

*Hero sighs. This is going to be a long trip.*

# Liar Part 3

Chapter Notes

Pain

There were no real dreams waiting for him, only flashing images and sounds; nonsensical mutterings and random colors flickering around the insides of Sunny's head. His body kind of felt like it was softly drifting downwards, but he never seemed to hit the ground. The strange colors finally started to congeal into somewhat-comprehensible pictures as if a dream was going to begin, but it never did.

There's one picture in particular that Sunny's mind keeps fixating on, but he doesn't know why. It's a door. A memory of a door that he had opened in this awful building, but without ever stepping inside. Why was it that he didn't go in there, again? Wasn't there a reason?

*Opening a door just to close it was such a strange thing to do. But he was good at that.*

Sunny's eyelids began to reopen as he heard the sound of something beginning to shuffle around beside him. The boy was not sure how much time had passed since he had sprawled himself back across the ground, but it felt as if it couldn't have been longer than an hour or two. Sunny's arms shivered in response to waking up on a cold, uncomfortable floor.

The captor opened his eyes. Sunny's mind remained empty for but a single second before the horror flooded his neurons once again.

The captive was moving. Basil's eyes were still closed, but the boy had begun to stretch his legs slightly. He was waking up.

*Sunny sat upright. Basil's eyes opened.*

For a moment, they only stare at each other's faces in silence. One bears an expression of fear, and the other an expression of gentle confusion. Basil has not yet remembered what was happening. For that single, solitary moment, Basil was free from the situation the two of them had been forced into. Basil is temporarily detached from the nightmare. He's just a tired, bruised boy waking up on the floor. That's what Basil deserved. He deserved to be free.

If only he could have stayed that way.

*The moment ended.* Basil opened his mouth as if to speak and seemingly tried to lean himself forward, but only then realized the position his body was in. Basil attempted to move his arms, and an expression of quiet shock crawled onto him.

Basil closed his mouth again, and silently stared Sunny in the face, eyes widening in fear. Those eyes then squinted in confusion, before finally returning to something that vaguely resembled the appearance of mild distress. Perturbance, maybe... *but not panic.*

"I k-kinda lost it again for a minute there, huh? Haha..." Basil mumbled and very quietly faked a laugh.

Sunny stared at him in shock, incapable of generating anything to say in response.

"S-Sunny... *can you please untie me now?"*

"*Yes!* S-Sorry!"

Finally, this godforsaken nightmare would be over.

Sunny took a step towards Basil...

*...and stopped.*

"Sunny?"

Sunny thought back to what he had seen earlier.

A terrible voice emerged in Sunny's mind. A nightmarish, twisted, primal thing which lurked inside him.

*Basil had been lying about his injury, lying about his need for sleep, faking everything in front of Sunny...*

*Empty orange cans.* Something he had been hiding. Basil had hidden the empty containers. There was an empty can in the truck, too.

**It was him.** A sinister voice prodded Sunny in the back of his head. **It was him. Who else could it have been? You know it was. Didn't you see the way he came apart? There's no one else here. *It was him.***

*Shut. up.*

*"S-Sunny?"* Basil called out one last time, before an expression of cold realization started to spread across his face.

Sunny stared at his friend but said nothing. He could feel himself starting to grow a miserable frown. Basil's eyes widened.

N-No! It's okay S-Sunny! I wouldn't! I w-would never leave you alone in here!

That's what he said... *with that knife poking out of his pocket.*

*Sunny couldn't untie Basil.*

*Sunny felt horrible*. He felt awful and dirty and disgusting doing this. *He wanted to trust Basil.* That's the promise he made to himself. This time, his promise to Basil hadn't even lasted a day.

Sunny thought back to the things Basil said and the way Basil acted before he passed out. Basil had tried to kill himself after hurting his friend, and in that moment it almost seemed as if he was considering trying to do so again.

*Why would Basil want to do something like that?*

***It was Sunny's fault.*** He forced himself on Basil and traumatized him all over again. Sunny might've been Basil's only friend left, and he had just done something absolutely unforgivable. Sunny took advantage of him fin his desperation.

Basil didn't like him like that at all. Of course he didn't. What Sunny had done must have been disgusting and scary.

There was nowhere else to run right now. Basil was trapped alone with Sunny, and Sunny pressed his feelings on top of him. Basil was anxious, tired, injured and scared, but despite all that, Sunny had still put a new weight on his shoulders just because he felt like he could get away with it. No matter what happened, Sunny would always end up hurting Basil all over again.

…

*But it was going to be fine.* It was fine. It was Monday now. The sun would rise in a few hours, if it hadn't already. Someone would come in today and help them. He wouldn't have to stay tied up for long. They would get help, and Basil wouldn't have to be treated like this. They would take him back to the hospital, and make sure he couldn't harm himself any further. Sunny would tell him over and over how sorry he was...

*"I'm sorry."* Sunny apologized.

Basil stared at him, shocked.

For a moment, the room was dead silent. Sunny felt like he was going to burst into tears. He couldn't take this anymore. Basil stared at the ground now, the weight of his actions seemingly dawning on him.

*"Why didn't you tell me? Why couldn't you just let me know you were in pain?"* Sunny begged him. Basil didn't respond.

"…I was scared." Basil whispered with a shaky breath.

“*Scared?* Scared of what?”

Basil’s mouth opened as if he was going to speak, but then he shut it again. The blonde’s eyes rapidly shifted to the side. His lips trembled for a moment, before Basil forced them back under his control.

*“I d-don’t have to tell you.”*

An empty, horrified chill ran through Sunny’s entire body. With those words, it felt as if all the remaining hope in the world had finally been torn away. Nothing was ever going to fix this.

“**Why?**” Sunny prodded. “Why can’t you just tell me?

The other boy was silent.

“Is it me? Are you afraid of me, Basil?”

Basil’s mouth opened again. No words left it. It closed again. His lips quivered. His shoulders trembled.

*“**BASIL!** Why won’t you tell me?”*

*“I can’t.”* He whimpered.

“Please just show me I can trust you…” Sunny begged.

*“You can’t.”*

*“**Stop saying that!**”* Sunny growled.

“Sunny… I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about the cut on my stomach. I promise I won’t hide it anymore… will you please untie me?"

*The room fell silent.*

“I can’t.” The boy mirrors.

*That silence was now deafening.*

This was not the last time Basil requested for Sunny to untie him. He made a few more arguments, a few more promises, and a few more mild attempts to break free. Every word that left his mouth made Sunny feel ill. *Was it wrong to do this? He just didn't want to take any risks...*

With every new request for release, Sunny felt himself fading away. The walls in the room started to feel like they were far off in the distance. This wasn’t real after all. It was much too horrible to be real.

He could feel it in that moment. If he closed his eyes, he'd be back there again. Back in a cold, white room that he had lived for longer than he could remember. He could finally let go of everything this time, and disappear forever into a world that he could be safe in. He'd never hurt Basil again, and he'd never have to consider that Basil would hurt him.

But the thought of it made him feel sick. He didn't deserve any kind of comfort or escape. He wouldn't run away again, *if only to punish himself.*

At some point, the requests turned into pleas. The black-haired prison guard had still not spoken a single word in response, incapable of bringing himself to. Sunny began to feel as if Basil no longer cared about being untied, he just wanted Sunny to acknowledge him. Sunny was worried that if he said anything in return, his strained determination might break and he would set Basil free. If Sunny did so and it ended up being a mistake, then he would never be able to catch Basil like this a second time. Not in his condition. Even if Basil was injured too, Sunny was the one who could barely keep his balance. If Basil ran off once more, Sunny would never be able to stop him.

*Sunny's own restraint managed to hold, until Basil finally asked him a question he could not ignore.*

"Sunny?"

"Why did you kiss me?" Basil inquired, his voice low to the ground. The flower boy stares at the floor.

Sunny could have sworn he heard something shatter inside his head.

*Why?*

"Because..." Sunny trailed off.

"B-Because I like you."

*For a few seconds, the room is silent. Sunny watches as Basil's eyes widen momentarily, but then shrink back down again.* Whatever those words do inside of the blonde's head, it isn't very pleasant. The light slowly fades from Basil's blue irises, his gaze steadily becoming lifeless as Sunny watches in silence. The other boy's eyebrows begin to furrow in distress. Something inside of Sunny's friend is slipping away. Basil mutters a single word under his breath.

*"Liar."*

Liar?

Sunny felt kind of upset that Basil had said that... *but only a little.* Did he really not believe him after what he just did?

"*It's the truth.* I really... *like you a lot*-"

"No you don't. *Just stop."* Sunny's friend denied him again, much more quickly this time.

*Sunny felt like he had been kicked in the stomach.*

"I'm s-sorry about showing it right then... but I do." Sunny insisted.

Basil didn't respond. Sunny was the one being ignored now, their positions having swapped.

*"I know it's terrible of me to say this now, b-but..."* Sunny trailed off.

"I... d-dreamt about you all the time those four years."

Basil said nothing.

"I missed you... *a lot."* Sunny swallowed. "I don't know how I could even explain how..."

Sunny's claim was cut short. Basil had started trembling rather intensely, and Sunny could not tell if he was doing so from fear, sadness...

*or anger.*

"Basil?"

Basil continued looking **anywhere** other than at Sunny, refusing to acknowledge his presence. The blonde frigidly scowled at nothing, tears in his eyes. Basil wouldn't look at him.

"Basi-"

*"If you had really been thinking of me, you would have c-come and seen me a single time."* Basil cut him off.

Sunny opened his mouth as if to speak but Basil cut him off again before any sound could exit his throat.

"I was across the street, S-Sunny. I wasn't even ten minutes away."

Sunny hunched over slightly when Basil spoke those words. His lungs tightened and his stomach burned with a stabbing pain. He felt as if he had just been struck by something heavy.

*Basil looked at him now. Basil glared at Sunny.*

"***Miss me?*** You could have seen me whenever you wanted. For four years you missed me and you never spoke to me at all?"

The way Basil was looking at him now made Sunny feel like he was going to split in half. The blonde couldn't take any more. He was hurt, tired, scared, restrained, exposed. Basil was at the end of his bloodstained rope, and he couldn't stand to hold himself together any longer.

"**You're** the one who stopped opening **your** door. And **now** you're going to act like you were t-thinking about me? *You're really going to say that?"*

Every emotion in Basil's skull seemed to radiate off of him, twisting in circles around Sunny's entire body. Those ribbons dug into the boy's skin, growing taut as if he was now commanded by phantom puppet strings. Basil's gaze froze him in place.

*It was still very cold in this building. Sunny couldn't feel it.*

"Why are you s-still lying to me even after everything we've gone through? Don't you think that's a little too cruel?" Basil whimpered.

"I'm. not lying." The boy choked out.

Sunny struggled to speak. Basil is just saying this stuff right now because he's hurt. Sunny had hurt him, he couldn't be upset that his friend was acting this way. They were both currently in horrible pain, alone in a cold room with no one to help them.

*And Basil was right after all, wasn't he?. Everything he said was true.*

"After what you just did... can't you just be honest with me **once**? *PLEASE!"* Basil begged him.

Sunny felt like he had just been struck in the head once again. This was the blow that would kill him.

Basil took a shaky breath and seemingly tried to steady himself.

"I... *I get it*. I understand why you were worried about me."

"But you would really fake something like... ***this?*** *For what? To keep me from hurting myself?"*

Fake? It wasn't fake... *Fake?*

"Can't you see how much more this hurts? How much longer are you going to keep acting like this?"

*What?* No. What Basil was saying was wrong. Sunny needed to say something. He had to say something so that Basil would understand. Anything.

"I just wanted... j-just..." Sunny struggled.

The eyepatched boy rubbed the tips of his fingers together. He felt an uncomfortable buzzing in his forehead. The room was tilting.

"*You promised.* You promised and you left. I know I didn't deserve that promise... so couldn't you have gotten rid of me right then?" Basil hit him again.

"Do you really just despise me **that** much?"

**"I don't!"** Sunny objected.

*"STOP LYING!!!"* Basil yelled back.

*"I'M NOT L-"*

*"YES YOU ARE! You've been doing **nothing** but lying to me since that night. EVERY OTHER WORD THAT COMES OUT OF YOUR MOUTH IS A LIE!!"*

*"What?* That's-"

*"Basil, my eye feels fine! Basil, it **couldn't** have been you who took us out here! Basil, let me hold onto this photo for you for when I '**come back again**.'"* Basil was growing increasingly hysterical.

The blonde's voice cracked at the end. Sunny helplessly took note of every pained drop of venom that left his friend's mouth, petrified.

"*Really?* And how many years will you be g-gone this time, S-Sunny?"

*Stop...*

Sunny was going to throw up.

"**Y-You're** upset at **ME** for hiding stuff from **YOU?** Hahaha! *Can't you even see how m-mean that is? **W-WHY DO YOU HATE ME SO MUCH??!!! I'M SORRY!!! YOU KNOW I AM!!!"*** Basil screamed at him, his voice falling to pieces.

The room goes quiet.

"I... I don't hate you."

Basil didn't respond. All the light left his eyes as he looked away. The blonde just stared silently at the floor as if he was dead.

"I don't hate you, Basil. I..."

Sunny stopped himself. There was nothing that he could say right now.

"I like you." Sunny censored himself. "*I like you so much it hurts."*

*"Please stop."* Basil said to the floor, barely lifting his voice off the ground.

The black-haired boy stared at the wall behind them for a moment, his mind still incomprehensibly scrambling out of his control, desperate to find a solution. The entire room was falling apart around him. Sunny spoke again, but didn't quite start to understand what he was even talking about until he had said the words himself.

He took a step closer to Basil. "...if you don't want to believe me, then maybe I'll prove it."

*...What?*

Basil scowled at him quizzically. He didn't understand what Sunny was talking about.

Sunny moved closer to his friend, and slowly crouched down in front of him.

*Wait, what is he doing?*

The flower boy continued staring at Sunny, seemingly trying to find another objection but unsure what Sunny was actually attempting to say.

Sunny took a crouched step towards his friend.

*Basil's eyes started to grow very wide.*

***This is a really bad idea.***

Sunny's own eye widened. They both stared at each other in a state of shock. Sunny kept moving closer.

Sunny didn't remember moving it himself, but he felt his arm land on Basil's leg as it had before. He pushed it down as he began to lean in towards Basil's body.

Basil's eyes somehow grew even wider. Sunny felt his heartbeat triple.

*"S-Sunny? **SUNNY!!**"*

Sunny was too close, Basil couldn't take it anymore. The blonde shut his eyes and turned his head slightly, but not quite enough to have been trying to escape his friend's approach.

The eyepatched boy watched his friend squirm and continued to move closer. He was almost close enough to feel Basil's breath now.

Basil whimpered quietly as if discomforted, but his lips parted, just barely. *He had opened his mouth himself.*

*Sunny's heart was going to blow out of his chest.*

What is wrong with you? Remember what JUST happened before? You're going to do this to him AGAIN?

*It didn't work because Basil didn't let him finish last time. Now Basil couldn't go anywhere. Sunny could still fix this. He could prove to Basil that he wasn't lying to him. Basil would believe him after this. It would only take a second.*

**What was he talking about? This was a bad idea...**

Is this how you wanted your friend to think of you? As someone who would take control of him right now? *What the fuck is wrong with you?*

*Sunny hesitated.* He stopped moving forward.

If he took advantage of Basil right now, he would never be able to take it back. Basil would think that Sunny was just using him to comfort himself. That wasn't true... he just wanted him to understand...

*Sunny thought about how Mari and Hero treated each other with tender, honest, polite patience. Each constantly waiting on the other, both always sidelining themselves so that their friend was comfortable with growing steadily closer. They moved slowly and carefully, because they knew that the special thing they had was soft and fragile. They always remembered to be patient.*

**Basil hated him right now.** He resented him for who and what he was, and that's what Sunny deserved. But he couldn't let his best friend hate him forever. The two of them still had to get out of here. Sunny was going to force Basil to have a better life, whether he wanted it or not.

Doing what he was about to do might temporarily keep Basil from hating him, or it might make everything worse again. Even thinking about something like this was terribly selfish, but Sunny was so desperate for Basil to believe him. He needed him to know, and he needed him to know **NOW**.

...

*But that was all about him.* Not Basil. *For Basil, he would move away. He had to.*

Sunny let go of Basil's leg. He moved backwards slowly, pulling away from the other boy, and took a shaky breath. Basil watched him silently, staring directly into his eyes.

The blonde finally averted his gaze back to the floor.

*"I knew it."* Basil muttered.

Sunny wished he was dead.

The room fell silent. Neither spoke any longer.

Sunny hung his head by Basil's side, nearly setting it on the floor.

Sunny didn't deserve it, but he felt tears start to build in his eyes. He shouldn't have been the one feeling bad right now. This was wrong.

For a moment, he felt as if his friend might comfort him like he used to, but Basil did not move an inch. Sunny tried to find something to say to his friend, but struggled against the crushing weight of his guilt.

He stood back up again. Sunny didn't have time to be acting like this. Even if the blonde seemed okay right now... Basil had lost a lot of blood.

"I'll go g-get you something to drink." Sunny muttered, miserable.

Basil silently stared at the floor as Sunny began to move towards the storage room exit.

Sunny tried to walk forward, but an overwhelming flood of stars filled the corners of his vision. The air around him felt like a dense blanket, weighing down his body.

"S-Sorry Basil, just give me a second..."

Sunny laid down on the floor for a moment, waiting for the crushing feeling to pass. It didn't.

He tries to push himself back up again, but his arms feel weak. He'll just have to lie down for another minute or two. It's nice to lie down.

Sorry, Basil...

*Just give him one more second.*

# Beached

Chapter Notes

**Happy Birthday, Basil 2/18/23**

Kel was having a pretty decent time, all things considered. Poking fun at Aubrey was something he was somewhat out of practice for, but the fundamentals came back to him rather quickly. He didn't like seeing Aubrey the way she was acting in the hospital and wanted to get her back to her old self again, but he'd be dishonest if he claimed that he wasn't also messing with her for his own enjoyment. Even after all these years, she still had such an uncontrollable temper... *tsk tsk, Aubrey.*

Kel had been a bit surprised that his brother had suggested taking a trip like this, but he was nearly floored when Hero told him that he was going to be nabbing Polly's car and that he didn't want to tell their parents they were leaving beforehand. It was pitched as a stealth mission. *This was totally sick.*

He was probably going to be grounded for a month when they got back, but this trip was something important and worth being punished for. Hopefully dad would understand, and vouch for them before mom tried to crucify the two brothers as a warning to their baby sister about what happens to kids who run away from home. At the very least, Kel could take solace in the knowledge that Hero was going to be the one facing the brunt of the criticism for once.

Although... the way that Hero had been acting was more than a little unnerving to Kel. He seemed so desperate to go on this trip. So *insistent.* Hero's brother wasn't entirely sure what was up with him, but he knew that what had happened with Sunny and Basil was still effecting him a lot more than he was letting on.

When Sunny finally told them the truth, Kel had been worried that Hero was going to shut down again, or close himself off completely. That didn't seem to be the case so far, but his brother's composure almost made Kel feel worse. Being sad or confused or angry... those were definitely the normal responses one might have to a situation like this.

Kel suddenly feels himself take pause.

*What about himself? Why didn't he feel... angrier? Sadder? Was it just because it had been so long now since they lost her? Is he just numb to everything now?*

It really had felt like they were just about to start fixing this. Like they were going to join back up with each other again, becoming friends like they had been before. Then Sunny told them what had really happened. Everything, every bit of it, was instantly torn away in a single moment. *How many times was this going to keep happening? Should they even keep trying anymore?*

Even Kel understood that the odds they were going to poke around their old vacationing grounds and just happen to find Sunny and Basil hanging around as beach fugitives was ridiculously slim, but he figured that the whole trip was supposed to be symbolic more than anything. Something to help the three of them who remained... *move on,* or something.

*Kel wasn't sure he was going to be able to move on this time.*

*Maybe...* Maybe if the three of them could stay together through all of this, they would be fine. They were older now, they wouldn't make the same mistakes they did last time. Their trip was proof of that.

Hero had briefly pulled his brother aside before they snuck off on their little quest and told him not to bother Aubrey too much on this trip; she was clearly in a bad place and this whole experience was still weighing heavily on all of them. Kel agreed, but he also felt as if keeping *too* much distance from Aubrey wasn't for the best, even if that might be what she'd prefer. Aubrey needed someone to cheer her up, or at the very least, distract her from the cruel reality that had once again been dropped on them without warning.

*Don't bother Aubrey...* What level of bothered was Hero talking about? Aubrey had a sort-of baseline level of bothered that she tended to hover around at all times, so was Hero talking about *bothered bothered* or ***bothered*** *bothered?*

Maybe Aubrey wasn't actually as bothered as she appeared to be. She was probably totally stoked to be hanging out with her two favorite brothers in the whole world again. Who could blame her.

Despite the way that things had turned out after Sunny and Basil were sent to the hospital, Kel still felt quite thankful to his brother. If Hero hadn't insisted they go see Aubrey after she pushed Basil into the lake, the three of them would have likely never been able to talk to each other like this again. Kel had been angry with Aubrey, and at the time was ready to cut her off entirely.

*Kel clowned around in the vehicle.* To his disappointment, the other three occupants of the car seemed uninterested in playing eye-spy with him. They were probably intimidated by how good he was at spying things, and who could blame them? He tried to do a crossword, but whoever made it was cheating so it wasn't a fair game.

Kel tried to have some more fun with her but Aubrey doubled down on ignoring him. Hero begged Kel for a drink because apparently he didn't have the ability to relocate his hands.

*Then the phone rang.*

Hero invited him to pick it up. Kel agreed to do so and swiftly gave his greetings.

"You've reached Hero's phone, Kel speaking." Kel introduced himself.

"What? *NO!* Give the phone to Hero I don't want to talk to **you**!" A familiar voice complained from the other side of the call.

*"Hero is busy right now, can I take a message?"*

"I don't have time for this! Put Hero on the phone!!" Kim was shouting, but it seemed as if she was attempting to keep her voice down.

"I can't, he's got **both** of his hands full." Kel stated, rolling his eyes. Hero squinted at his brother. *"Also, can you speak a little louder please?"*

An irritated growl emerged from the speaker.

*"Is Aubrey in the room with you?"* Kim whispered.

"No, we're in the car right now."

"**SHUT UP**! Is she there or not? *Can she hear me from where she is sitting?"*

"What? I mean... I don't think so. I can barely hear you, actually-"

"*SHHH!* Listen to me you dribbling prick. Aubrey asked me to feed her rabbit this evening and as I went to her room and I wasn't poking around or anything but she packed really quickly and left a bunch of stuff lying around and I was just picking it up for her so she wouldn't come back to such a mess but I found the razor she uses to shave her legs and I know that's the only one she has because I bought it for her when I accidentally broke her other one I wasn't snooping for it, it was just sitting there by the bed-"

Kel nodded along to the irritated rambling from the girl on the other side of the phone, even though she wouldn't be able to see it. Hero squinted at him again.

"The important part is that all her blades were missing. She said it was just an accident and that she'd never do anything like that again but I didn't understand why all the blades would've gone and I didn't find any in the bathroom and it's not like I was trying to go through all her stuff but I'm a concerned friend you stupid nerd and so I went ahead and looked around a little bit because what if Aubrey hurt herself again and I didn't try to do anything about it firs-"

"I understand." Kel confirmed.

"I can't be there watching over her right now so you have to do it." Kim finally paused. "If I find there's even a single scratch on her when she gets back from your little nerd trip I'm going to shove one of those basketballs you love so much so far up your ass that you will look like you're nine months pregnant-"

"Rodger that." Kel confirmed again, scratching himself.

"*SHUT UP!!* And **don't** tell her I called or she'll get all defensive again... Just keep your egg-spewing mouth shut *Or. Else."* Kim instructed him.

"No seriously. I got it, I promise. You can count on me, -" Kel started.

*"DON'T SAY MY NAME DON'T LET HER KNOW I CALLED JUST SHUT UP SHUT THE HELL UP-"*

Aubrey removed one of her earbuds and leaned towards the front of the vehicle, seemingly about to ask for something.

"-ow. *Meow, I sure love catnip."* Kel finished.

Hero turned his head to face Kel, his mouth agape in confusion. Aubrey stared at him.

*"THIS WAS A MISTAKE I'M HANGING UP!!!"*

The call was ended.

---

*Hero was beginning to have third thoughts to his second thoughts about this idea.*

It isn't exactly crowded, but there are still quite a few people here. Hero wasn't expecting there to be so many. It's definitely not the kind of weather you could sunbathe in given the dense clouds overhead, and the harsh wind would likely dispose of any picnic blankets one tried to set up. Another sudden rush of air tore through Hero's ears.

*"Well, we're here."* Aubrey stated, trying to prompt someone to speak.

"Yep!" Kel confirmed.

"So what do we do now?" Aubrey asked, turning to face Hero.

Hero nervously scratched his hair. "I guess... *ask around?"*

The whole crux of this trip was already incredibly unrealistic, but it wasn't until Hero looked around at the normal people enjoying their normal summer day at this normal beach that he started to realize how stupid he might have seemed to the two people who tagged along with him.

Hero thought back to what Kel had mouthed to him in the car. The pair hadn't yet had a spare moment alone to talk about whatever it was he needed to say about his Aubrey-centric phone call. The brothers kept giving awkward, overly-prolonged looks to each other, trying not to make it too obvious that their friend was being excluded from... *something.*

*"Soooo...."* Aubrey started.

"What is the pitch, exactly?" She asked. *"Hey, have you seen two recently hospitalized teens walking around on the beach? One is missing an eye."*

Hero thought for a moment. "Let's just ask people if they've seen any teenage boys wearing bandages on their faces." He suggested. "Anyone who saw them probably wasn't studying them hard enough to identify their faces either way."

"They might have changed clothes, but I seriously doubt that bandage on Sunny's face could come off any time soon..."

*Bandages.* Hero thought to himself. Given the condition they were in, would Sunny even have been able to replace his bandages? A hole like that in his head could easily get infected, and an infection in such a serious wound could spell serious trouble outside the hospital.

Sunny and Basil weren't stupid. At the risk of throwing his brother and Aubrey under the bus, Hero had to admit that the two boys made up the slightly more... *composed* half of the younger four in their friend group. If they had been trying to track down Kel, this would have been easy. Kel had a way of making himself **very** publicly visible no matter where he was. Aubrey would have also likely been easy to spot, for much simpler reasons: *her hair was vibrant pink.*

*Aubrey was not as easily distracted or impulsive as Kel, but she had a tendency to get swept up in his over-the-top antics...*

*But Sunny and Basil?* They were quiet and bookish. Even if the two of them were injured around here somewhere, Hero felt it unlikely that they would ask a stranger for assistance, and if they did they might just get found out anyway. In all likelihood, they were probably avoiding being tracked at all costs. Both seemed to be experts at keeping to themselves, and Hero wasn't quite sure where they'd think to seek refuge in a situation like this.

"Too bad we don't have any photos of them..." Aubrey muttered. "Not that any of the ones that I had were exactly up-to-date anyway."

Kel suddenly grinned. "Don't worry Aubrey, I'm *waaaaaaaaay* ahead of you..."

Kel removed a piece of paper from his pocket. "Unfortunately I wasn't able to get it copied in time so we're going to have to take turns with it, but it should make explaining everything to people much easier." He confidently claimed.

Hero leaned over and looked at the image in Kel's hands. It was a very-poorly drawn sketch of a bandaged boy with one eye and a blonde with fluffy hair.

Hero didn't say anything. Aubrey stared at the drawing for a moment before speaking.

*"What the hell is that?"*

"It's Sunny and Basil." Kel replied with a tilted brow, as if the answer was obvious.

*"Neither of them look anything like that!"* Aubrey angrily objected, ripping the poorly-made illustration of their friends out of Kel's hand. "**Hey!**" Kel shouted, trying to grab back his

inaccurate recreation from Aubrey's grasp.

"With something like this you're just going to confuse and annoy everyone you talk to, ***as usual***." Aubrey chastised Kel for his mistaken actions.

*Aubrey tried to keep the image from him but Kel was taller and faster. He managed to snatch the drawing back and looked over it with a somber expression on his face.*

"Really? I think it looks pretty good. What is it missing?" He inquired.

"*Oh I don't know Kel,* how about **everything**??" Aubrey reprimanded.

Kel squinted at his drawing, not seeming to pay much attention to Aubrey's criticism. Hero watched as a lightbulb must have gone off in his brother's head. The boy removed a pencil from his back pocket. He began making very gentle scratches across the paper, apparently generating what he considered to be some kind of visual improvement.

Kel turned the picture back around. *"TA-DAA!!!"* He exclaimed. "I knew it was missing something."

*Hero squinted at the illustration. The only thing that had changed was Basil. Kel had drawn tiny cartoon tears that were now dripping down his face.*

"How are you **this** stupid?" Aubrey remarked in disbelief.

"Actually, that does look a *little* more like him..." Kel's brother had to admit.

*"Hero!"* The girl protested.

After a few more minutes spent in a pointless argument, the three of them finally agreed to split up and look around while asking beachgoers if they had seen their missing friends. Hero began to walk up the beach, Kel would cover the most populated area, and Aubrey would head further down. They prepared to meet back up again in about half an hour and discuss what they had found. It was time to get serious about this.

---

Aubrey had actually suggested that they **not** check the beach since it was such a populated area. If Sunny and Basil were seriously hiding somewhere they had visited before, this location seemed the **least** likely, in her mind. Far too easy to get spotted. Hero had seemed rather insistent about it, though... so Aubrey hadn't really argued.

She did actually ask a few people if they had seen anybody matching Sunny or Basil's general description, but all she got was a load of questions and discomforted expressions.

*With the bright pink hair, and the bandage around her arm, Aubrey felt she might have looked kind of intimidating. Like bad news. Like a hooligan.*

Those things were all true of course, but it was in moments like these that she wished she could blend in a bit better. Being around normal people didn't exactly come naturally to Aubrey anymore.

Continuing on her assigned path down the beach, she came across a large stretch of sand that had no one to occupy it. Aubrey exhaled a sigh of relief. She didn't much feel like talking to anyone right now, stranger or otherwise.

She thought back to their conversations in the car. It had been... *nice* spending time with the brothers again, but it was also exhausting... *and not just because of Kel.*

It all felt really *uncomfortable.* As if all three of them had just gone through a messy breakup and yet nobody had the courage to address any of it verbally. The trio all talked and joked around, but she felt as if maybe they should have been discussing something more serious. The shitty thing about this kind of silence is that Aubrey couldn't know if the others were intentionally avoiding more serious discussions or if those were simply being packed away for later. If the former, then it was strange that those topics had suddenly become restrained after what had already been said in the hospital. If the latter... then when was *later* going to be, anyway? Constantly wondering when someone was going to say something was just putting her on edge.

*Maybe it was her fault.* Maybe they didn't want to talk about everything that had happened because of what she did to herself. As if she deserved some kind of special treatment even after the way she acted. *As if she was the only victim here.*

Aubrey itched at the bandage on her arm. *She wanted to just take it off already...* but then everyone would see it.

Regardless, the fact that they were even on this trip at all and none of them had yet spoken a single word about either Sunny or Basil's actions was more than a bit notable.

...

But maybe she preferred it that way.

Aubrey kicked at the sand under her feet. It felt nice. She watched as the wind beat against the tall grasses bordering the shore. Aubrey hadn't been to the beach in... *a long time.* She probably hadn't revisited any of these old places since Mari passed.

*Was murdered.* Aubrey's mind corrected her. *She didn't just PASS, she was killed.*

...

After continuing down the empty beach for a while longer and continually seeing nothing but more vast, empty stretches of sand, Aubrey decided that she would finally turn back around and see if she could find the others. If she went back now she was going to be a bit early, but

she figured the two brothers would have also likely run out of people to ask by now anyway. She began to approach the area where they had arrived.

Kel was a few feet ahead of her, standing off near the wet sand and staring at what looked to be a mass of seaweed slapping against the shore.

Aubrey intended to simply walk past him, eyes glued firmly ahead, but Kel noticed her approach and moved directly into her immediate path. Aubrey stopped moving, waiting to see what it was that Kel wanted. Kel had an expression on his face that Aubrey couldn't identify. It was stuck somewhere between serious and seriously stupid.

"Hey, Aubrey."

"Hi, Kel."

*Silence.*

Kel didn't say anything else. He just kept standing there like an idiot. The seaweed seemingly felt awkward and left with the receding tide.

*Cool.*

"Bye Kel."

Aubrey stepped around him and continued walking down the beach before she could get wrapped up in whatever stupid joke he was pulling. Kel scratched the back of his head and finally spoke as she tried to walk past him.

*"Can I talk to you?"* The boy inquired.

"You already are."

Aubrey instinctively brushed off his question, but what he asked had seriously caught her off guard. *She felt her breath quicken slightly. She wasn't expecting a question like that.*

That tone was surprisingly serious... by Kel standards, anyway. What does he mean, *can they talk?* Aubrey didn't really see anything to talk about right now. The two of them rarely talked when they were completely alone together. Mostly because Aubrey tended to avoid situations in which they would be isolated with each other, as to prevent the hassle of having to strangle him to death.

"Yeah, but..." Kel glanced around at the people walking around the beach that day, seemingly searching for someone amongst the crowd. Kel frowned.

*"Can I talk to you somewhere more private?"*

"No."

"It's about Hero." Kel replied. *Hero?*

"Okay, okay, whatever." Aubrey concedes.

Aubrey followed Kel behind a public restroom that was situated by the side of the road. *Seriously? They were going to talk next to the bathroom?*

"Love the atmosphere you picked." Aubrey rolled her eyes. "So what is it you want to tell m-
"

A sudden gust of wind slapped Aubrey in the face with her own hair for what must have been the eleventh time that day. Enough was enough. She reached into her back pocket and pulled out a hair tie to prevent it from flapping around everywhere while she waited for Kel to speak.

But Kel wasn't saying anything. He was just standing silently and staring like an idiot.

*"What?"* Aubrey hissed.

"Huh?"

"Why aren't you saying anything? You said you wanted to talk about Hero?"

"Yeah, I was just waiting until you were done with your... *hair thing*."

"Well, *I'm done."* Ponytail Aubrey stated.

Aubrey had expected that Kel might take a moment to actually think before speaking, but that wasn't the case at all. Her fault for having such an unrealistic expectation.

"Do you think the stuff Hero said before was really true? That he wants to find Sunny and Basil just for us? For closure?"

Aubrey felt her arms tense up a little at the first mention of the word "closure" since they had begun this trip. Something about that word just felt... *intimidating*, even though she had been searching for it for so long.

"I mean, yeah? Isn't that why any of us are here?" She inquired.

"*Is it?* You aren't worried about Sunny and Basil at all?" Kel responded.

"*What?* Of course I am." Aubrey hissed.

"But only because you want to give them your last words? To see them one more time and then split?" Kel requested clarification.

Aubrey felt a burning surge of irritation already beginning to build up in her stomach. "So you're saying you want to find them for... *what, exactly?* So we can all go and become good little friends again?" She asked, incredulous.

"Yes."

*Aubrey stared at him. She felt like she had just been slapped in the face.*

"So you're just... *okay* with what they did?" Aubrey felt her breath strain slightly. Her hands balled into fists.

"*Really, Aubrey?* Of course I'm not." Kel glared at her.

"So what are you even talking about right now? I thought we all agreed we were doing this for us... *and for Mari."*

*Kel's eyes broke from Aubrey's. He hesitated.*

"*It's*... It's like you said before. Mari is dead." He stated. "And I'll never get over that, but... I want to focus on the friends I might still be able to help. I think that's what she would have wanted, too."

Aubrey was more than a bit taken aback. What Kel had said was probably true, but she was still somewhat shocked to hear him call Sunny and Basil *friends* after everything that had happened.

"So what's the difference? Why does it matter the reason we're doing this? We either find them or we don't." Aubrey stated, feeling increasingly annoyed as this conversation continued.

"I think Hero still blames himself. Like if he can't find them that he's... *failed her again,* or something." Kel said.

*That's fucked up.*

"I'm just worried that he's taking this really seriously. I mean, what do you think the odds are that we actually just find Sunny and Basil chilling on the beach?" He asked.

*Aubrey felt a little sick. The odds were basically zero. This was more or less a vanity trip.*

"So why are you telling me all this, Kel? What did you want me to do about it?" She asked.

"I just need your help... looking out for him a bit. In case this gets out of hand. Let me know if he starts doing anything *weird.*" Kel requested.

"I think he needs someone to suggest to him that Mari wouldn't hold what happened against him personally... but I don't think that person can be me." The boy admitted.

*Aubrey felt a wave of sadness.* "Alright. I think I get it." She replied. "Thanks for... letting me know."

Kel nodded.

"Alright, well... *good luck searching?"* Aubrey suggested, starting to walk back towards the shore to see where Hero had even run off to.

"Wait, there was another thing!" Kel objected

Aubrey stopped. "What?"

The basketball player hesitated for a second, bouncing on his feet.

*"Sooo...* how are **you** doing?"

"Okay. I think that's enough kelversation for today..." Aubrey concluded. "I'll see you in the car."

*She began walking away. Kel protested, but Aubrey was already ignoring him again.*

# So, About That

Chapter Notes

TW: *More Spiders*

*"SIR, I REALLY THINK YOU NEED TO COME LOOK AT HIM!!"*

*Too loud. Someone is being way too loud.*

Sunny stares at a medical diagram on the wall. It depicts a part of the human body. Its very round. For some reason, he can't really identify exactly what it is, even though he's sure he's seen it before. The text on the diagram is too small to see very well. Too small to read.

The colors on the poster seem really... **intense** for some reason. He can't tell how far away the image actually is.

He's trying to focus on something so he can calm himself down, but it isn't working. The boy holds himself entirely still and tries to steady his breaths, but his pulse is racing.

"Hey Sunny! How are you feeling, bud?"

*Someone just entered the room. They're talking to him. Sunny doesn't know who that is. Their voice is really loud. Sunny wishes he could tell them to be quiet.*

"Hey Sunny? Can you hear me?"

*Yes. He can hear you. Please stop talking so loud.*

"You look like you're having a bit of a moment, are you doing okay? Are you in any pain right now?"

*Yes.*

The man in white snaps his fingers in front of Sunny's face. Its really obnoxious. Its as if this guy wants him to look at his fingers. Can't he see Sunny is busy trying to read the text around this... *circle... thing?*

*Seriously, what is that? the cross section is all veiny on the inside. He definitely knows what that is.*

Sunny tries to keep thinking about the poster.

Having taken note of Sunny's refusal to look at his weird fingers, the man speaks again. "Dang, you're really fixated there, pal! What is it that's got you so-"

The obnoxious man stops talking for a brief moment.

*"Oh for fucks s-"* The man mutters an expletive under his breath upon turning to view the diagram Sunny was staring at.

"NURSE CAN YOU PLEASE GET THAT **OU**T OF THIS ROOM, THANK YOU!!" The man passive-aggressively yells at his co-worker to remove something from Sunny's room. *Loud.*

*Are they going to take away his plants? He had a lot of plants in his room, for some reason. Flowers.*

The man quickly turns back to Sunny and tries to give him some kind of reassurance about something. He seems much more serious now.

"Sunny I need you to try to listen to me. It's going to be okay."

*No it isn't.*

The woman standing to Sunny's side quickly steps forwards and removes the boy's round-thing-picture from the wall and disappears into the hallway with it. *Hey! He was looking at that!*

Sunny's mind suddenly begins to return to its previously-growing chaos. *Bring the poster back, please.*

The man continues trying to reassure him, which is strange because Sunny doesn't know this person.

"I promise you'll still be able to do all the stuff you used to."

*No he wouldn't. He'd never be able to do any of that stuff again. She was gone. Sunny killed her with his own two hands. Gone forever. He remembered every second of it. He would never forget it again. It was all finally a part of him now. From now until the day he dies.*

"You're shaking a bit, Sunny. Is it the eye? Does it still hurt for you?"

*His eye?*

***Eye**. That's what it was. It was a diagram of the inside of an eye. That's so obvious... why couldn't he tell right away?*

The man in front of him turns and asks the nurse in the hallway to do something, but Sunny isn't really paying attention.

*Eyes...* hers was gone. It had been chasing him for so long, but he couldn't feel it anymore. SOMETHING wasn't following him now, but thinking about her still felt more awful than he

could describe. He had been crying earlier.

*He hadn't cried in so long.*

It was going to be okay now, wasn't it? So why was he so scared right now? He's having trouble thinking straight. Thinking at all.

Sunny was already trying to forget something again. He never changes.

The man starts talking again. He looks really serious.

"Look Sunny, I'd give you something to calm you down if I could but you're already on some really heavy stuff right now so I'm going to need you to take a deep breath for me, okay?"

*A deep breath?* Sunny could do that. She taught him to do that. To help him not be so afraid...

*It didn't always work, though. He wished it did.*

The man (who must have been a doctor) stepped out into the hallway and walked quickly around the corner. The nurse from before enters the room and takes the same position in front of Sunny that the man had left unoccupied.

"Hey Sunny! Keep trying to take those **deep** breaths, okay? Your doctor will be back in just a second." She reassures him.

There's a loud buzzing inside Sunny's head.

"Try to focus on something positive..."

*Positive?*

"You have so many beautiful plants in your room! A lot of people came in really worried about you. You have a lot of great friends huh? You must be a really special kid."

***His friends**. Sunny remembered why he had started panicking in the first place.*

He told them. He told them everything. They walked out. They left after he told them.

They'd never forgive him for what he did. They'd hate him for the rest of his life... but that hardly mattered now.

*Basil.*

*Once he was gone, what would happen to Basil? He's just going to be... **alone**? Alone again? Left behind with them?*

*He doesn't want to go. He doesn't want to. He won't. No more running...*

*Anything but that room again. He can't go back.*

Is... this it? Is this what it feels like? To be entirely... awake? *It hurts. It hurts it hurts it hurts...*

"Do you want something to drink, Sunny? Are you thirsty at all?"

*Shut up. Stop talking.*

He doesn't have time for this... there's still so much more he needs to tell him. Tell him before he runs out of time...

Basil was probably awake again by now. Sunny needed to go see him.

He wished he had shoes. The floor is cold.

Its hard to walk. Its hard to stand. Everything is flat and tilting... far away yet right in front of him.

"*H-Hey!!* No, No... Sunny you need to sit back down for now, okay? ***HEY-"***

He's on the ground now... *gross. This floor was probably dirty.*

The woman is grabbing at him now... she takes him by the arm and helps him back up. *Thank you.*

Sunny resumes walking forward.

*Why is she still pulling him back like that? He'd already stood up, thanks. She could stop now.*

The woman forces him to sit back down again. She must not think he could walk to Basil's room by himself, but he had already done it once.

The woman seems rather panicked. She's trying to keep an eye on him but her gaze keeps getting reabsorbed in some pieces of paper on the clipboard she's holding. She keeps flipping them back and forth over one another, seemingly in an attempt to confirm something for herself. The woman only becomes more agitated the longer she continues flipping.

"Listen Sunny, can I trust you to stay put for just a second? Just sit here, okay? I'll be right back."

Sunny nods.

The nurse steps quickly out of the room and starts yelling for the doctor's attention again. Even from the hallway it's still so loud...

He can barely make out their voices from the hallway. The nurse is expressing her confusion to the man who was in here earlier.

"Are you sure we gave him the proper dosage? It says he's in his mid-teens but the boy just looks so... emaciated. I think we gave him a little too much."

*Sunny isn't entirely sure what they're talking about, but the man agrees. They think there's something wrong with him.*

*Well, whatever.* It was nice to take a break for a moment, but he needs to go now. Sunny stands back up again and starts walking towards the door.

Somebody yells at him... *why is everyone always yelling at him?*

He ends up on the ground again. Oops.

He tries to push himself up with his arms but it just feels impossible...

***Get up. He has to get up.***

---

He opens his eyes. He's on the floor. It feels like something is on top of him.

*What happened? Why was he down here? Where was he?*

**Basil**.

*Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck.* He's still over there... he still hasn't had anything to drink. *How long had Sunny been passed out like this?* Basil couldn't take care of himself, Sunny had to do it.

Sunny puts his hands on the floor and tries to push up, but he barely even gets an inch off the ground. Whatever is on top of him, it's even heavier now.

The floor feels... **strange**. Something about the floor is different than it was bef-

*Spiders. The entire floor is nothing but spiders now. Spiders and splinters and hairs.*

They're all over him. His entire back is carpeted in spiders, like a dense blanket of skittering legs. They're crawling over every inch of him and weighing him down... forcing Sunny to the floor while they eat him.

Sunny tries to scream but he barely even whimpers. He tries to move but only ends up agitating the spiders more. Sunny closes his eye and tries to imagine that none of this is happening.

The next thing he knows, he's waking up again.

*Where is he? He's on the floor...* **Basil**. Basil is still tied up. Sunny tries to get up but can't. There's something all over him. **Spiders**. *More and more and more...*

Every time he starts to fade back to reality, he remembers. Every time he remembers, he starts to panic again. Every time he panics, it becomes more and more difficult not to pass out. He can barely even move. Sunny is trapped in a never ending loop.

How many times has this happened? How **long** has this been happening? It could have been ten minutes, it could have been ten hours.

Without the previous adrenaline that had been forcing him forward in a mad search for his friend, Sunny suddenly felt himself almost incapable of lifting his arms. After his argument with Basil, the shadows in the corners of his mind seemed to now flow freely through the walls, bending and twisting into angled forms which the spiders used to climb together in steadily increasing numbers. Towering pillars of arachnids were asserting themselves into the previously-empty building, claiming this place as their own. Everything was so much worse now. It only kept getting worse.

*With every cycle, Sunny becomes more and more terrified...* but not because of the spiders. He almost starts to adjust to the countless legs cascading over his body...

***But Basil is still tied up**. He still needed help. How long had Basil been waiting for him? how long had Sunny just been laying here while his friend remained trapped? Basil had lost blood. He needed water.*

Sunny's vision starts to fade again. He can't get up. He's paralyzed. In a few more seconds, the cycle will repeat all over again. He closes his eyelids.

He couldn't keep doing this. He needed to get up, and he needed to get up **now**.

Something makes a really loud crashing sound behind him. Sunny breath is caught in his throat. He would turn his head around to view the source of the noise but he's still petrified underneath the mass of chittering exoskeletons that sought to crush him. If something is coming for Sunny, he can't get away.

**Someone is touching him**. Someone is rotating his body to look him in the face. Sunny strains to keep his eye open, attempting to view his assailant.

A shadowy stranger stares down at him. Sunny tries to scream but feels as if he's forgotten how.

He asks the figure what he wants. Why he's doing this. Why had he taken them out here.

The figure only continues staring downwards in silence. Either it doesn't understand him, or it doesn't care. Sunny claws at his face, trying to remove the spiders that are obscuring his view of the person looming over his body.

The stranger suddenly starts to lean in closer. Sunny tries to shove him away but he's far too weak. The stranger grabs his arm.

He was going to move him. This person was going to take him away somewhere. Put him back in the truck.

Sunny begged the shadowy figure. *Please.* He could take him wherever he wanted, but don't leave Basil behind. Don't leave him tied up to die. Sunny had put him there. It would be his fault. Everything was always his fault.

His pleas only seemed to agitate and irritate the person watching him. Sunny desperately fought to stay awake, but the spiders on his chest were making it difficult to breathe.

Sunny felt a tear slide across his face as his vision began to fade. He'd once again failed to stay awake, just like he always did.

*Basil...*

---

"You gave us quite the scare there!" The doctor exclaims.

"Sorry, Sunny. We gave you a little too much medication earlier... I know it still hurts, but the new dosage won't make you feel so dizzy, I promise."

"The drug we're giving you is perfectly safe, and it will help take away the pain, we just have to be careful to not give you so much of it. It's kind of like... *eating Halloween candy."*

"A little candy at a time is nice, but eat too much and you start to feel sick, you know what I mean?" He smiles.

Sunny is shaking. The man's brows are knit slightly. He continues speaking.

"When we have injuries like yours, we can understandably become very very panicked and very very stressed. When we get stressed, our bodies release certain hormones and chemicals that are meant to help us move away from danger, but that aren't particularly helpful when it comes to healing our injuries... they can even make things a bit worse."

"Something stresses us out and our injuries only make that worse, which makes us more stressed, which makes our injuries worse... and so on. It's a vicious cycle."

*This guy talks a lot. But focusing on someone's voice helps Sunny stay calm. A little.*

"The fact that you're managing to freak out like this even with the depressants you're on makes me feel like whatever it is that's on your mind is some pretty serious business, huh? You've clearly been through a lot."

"But I want you to do your best and try to calm down for us, alright?"

*...Okay.*

"Try to get some sleep. Your mom should be here soon... you should rest up for that. Gonna have a lot to tell her about, I'd imagine."

*Mom? Mom's coming?*

"Don't worry, Sunny. Your ability to see will steadily return over time." The doctor reassured him once more.

"As long as you can keep yourself calm and avoid any more whacks on the noggin... you're going to be just fine."

# I Like You

*Because I like you.*

With those words, he felt his universe collapse in on itself. For a single moment, it felt like everything in the world had been unraveled and laid bare.

Basil knew that Sunny wasn't talking about liking him "as a friend," and to the blonde that fact was almost unthinkable.

Both of the "L" words had been banned from Basil's mind for a very, very long time. Locked away as to not torture him with pointless reminders of something he would never have.

He had imagined, years ago, what it might feel like to have someone say something like that to him. He felt as if he'd probably cry. He was always such a crybaby.

Sometimes when he pictured it, he imagined that it was in fact Sunny speaking those words, but just thinking those thoughts alone felt very… *forbidden. Unforgivable.* ***Sick.*** Boys weren't supposed to be that way.

He imagined that the two of them would be hanging out as usual, the pair reading their respective books in silence, and all of a sudden it would randomly slip from Sunny's lips, that deadpan confession of forbidden feelings.

Basil imagined it this way because he knew he could never bring himself to say it unless Sunny said it first, because revealing feelings like those was far too risky and Basil wouldn't take a chance if it meant possibly losing a best friend that was already too good for him. He liked Sunny far too much to do something so self-centered and irrational.

Basil definitely liked Sunny far more than Sunny liked him. He was sure of that.

It was all just the stuff of imagination. The kind of feelings that would cause Basil to experience intense bouts of silent, squirming discomfort from the searing embarrassment that arose when imagining words that would never be spoken and feelings that would never be revealed.

Those painful imaginings continued as he got older. When he was young, they were merely thoughts of embarrassment and shame, but after what Basil did, they morphed into a kind of sick, twisted torture. Every moment spent imagining those things became another example of Basil's evil. A momentary undoing of the concealment he used to hide his true nature from even himself. When he thought about such things, that was the proof of what he really was. Basil was an ugly little creature that mimicked human speech, a creature that lied to people so it could get what it wanted from them... one that claimed to care about them but had only ever cared for itself. A walking, talking disease that infected everything around it.

There was no one in the world less deserving of those words than Basil, and no one in the world less likely to say those words to him than his friend. Such an expression would never arise from Sunny's mouth, and Basil was sure of it.

*Until it did.*

**I like you**.

*He said it. He said those words. The circumstance was far from ideal, but that was the claim that left Sunny's mouth.* The words which were never to be said, straight from the mouth of the boy who was never to say them.

But although Basil had long fantasized about this exact experience, he couldn't deny that the moment he'd dreamt of did not feel the way he had imagined. Hearing those words didn't feel very good at all.

It felt… ***mean***.

*Because those words weren't true.*

There's no way that after all the years spent hiding from him, all the unacknowledged absences and repeated refusals... after all the horrible things Basil did to his friend and all the time the boy spent running from him… that those feelings were genuine.

Sunny wasn't stupid. He knew what Basil was, even if he so frequently refused to acknowledge it. Once Basil did what he did, that's when Sunny found him out. All the distrust that Sunny must have had for him had finally been justified. That's why Sunny had run away from him all those years. Why he promised and then left him behind.

If Sunny really did like Basil, there's no way he would have ever done something like that to him right now…

*Would he?*

Basil's perception of his friend is shattered once again. He wants to justify this action away, but finds himself incapable of doing so.

*Does believing Sunny is lying protect Sunny from him or him from Sunny? Both? Neither?*

*Basil didn't want to be liked. Or pretended to be liked. It didn't make any sense… and that was scary.*

Why did this have to happen now? They were having so much fun before. Laughing. Smiling. Hopeful that this nightmare was soon to be over.

Basil had too much fun. That's why things had ended up this way. He had let Sunny get too close again, and now his friend was confused. Stupid and confused and saying horrible lies that made Basil angry…

Sunny knew he was sorry. As awful as Basil was, Sunny had to understand that. *So why would he be doing this? It wasn't fair...*

Sunny didn't feel that way. He was just panicking. He was just afraid that if he didn't do something like that, Basil might hurt himself again.

*Why couldn't he have just told him? If Basil had just been honest about his wounds, Sunny wouldn't have freaked out like that… he wouldn't have done what he did…*

...

*That kiss was just a restraint. Another layer of tape meant to wrap Basil up and keep him away from himself.*

For a moment, Basil wasn't sure if he would believe Sunny meant what he had done in the bathroom until those words actually left his mouth. But now he knew.

***Sunny was a liar***.

He didn't like Basil at all, and Basil knew it. This was just the latest in a long string of lies emerging from his mouth. Basil's friend thought he could be tricked so easily, but Sunny was wrong.

Sunny didn't even like boys, he liked girls. Basil knew that for a fact. It might have been for what Sunny perceived as a good reason, but lying to Basil like this had wounded him deeply. The ceaseless, searing pain in his stomach felt like an afterthought now. Such a pain was nothing compared to this.

This was far too mean. It was such a horribly cruel thing for Sunny to have done to him… ***was Basil's friend always like this?***

*Would Sunny really have done something like that just to protect him? Something so twisted? So calculated and manipulative?*

*It just felt wrong…*

Basil began to wonder if Sunny just didn't know. Maybe he just did that but didn't understand what it really meant.

*Yeah. That was it. Of course it was!* Sunny had no idea what he was even doing. Basil's friend didn't know anything about stuff like that.

When Sunny first left his house after those four years, he was barely alive. A quiet, unresponsive zombie, moving as if piloted by some kind of mindless force. Rarely emoting, barely speaking. Animalistic.

He attacked Aubrey with a knife, as if doing so was somehow second-nature to him. He cut her and barely even reacted to her anger afterwards. Basil almost couldn't believe Aubrey had accompanied him back to his house later that week after what had happened. He wondered for a long time what Sunny must have said or done to clear up the animosity between him and her.

Maybe Kel or Hero had helped smooth it all over. Basil had trouble imagining that Sunny was capable of any sort of meaningful conversation given the state he was in. He largely failed to react meaningfully to anything at all.

The first emotion Basil actually saw him display after those four years was **fear**.

*Fear of him. Fear of what he did. Fear of the way he was acting.* Basil begged him not to leave again, but he did, because he was terrified. Sunny took the photo album and ran out of the bathroom, away from the person who cursed him.

Now Basil had done the same in return. *Twice*.

Sunny had been afraid of Basil, but not even half as afraid as he should've been. It was incredible that it even took this long for him to try and restrain his friend… maybe Basil should've just let him…

At least then Sunny wouldn't have to be afraid anymore.

**But you can't do that, because Sunny is defenseless, and that's your fault.**

After the events in the hospital, Sunny seemed to have become himself again. Basil had hoped he would be okay. Sunny looked and acted like he was better now, but he wasn't. He had barely been holding himself together. It was Basil's job to look out for him, like he had promised.

**You think you're in better condition than he is? Hahaha…**

*Yes.*

**Is there no mirror in this world clear enough for you to open your eyes and actually see yourself?**

*Basil was better. He was better right now because he had to be. He would be.*

Spending so much time isolated had hurt him. Sunny hadn't interacted with anyone else in four years. He went through puberty alone in his room, and he never learned how to interact with people as an adult. Even when they were still kids, Sunny struggled to relate with people. It was no surprise that he had become angry and impulsive after he had been isolated like that.

*That's why Sunny kissed him.* He's just tired and confused and scared, and was doing whatever he thought he could to hold his friend together, because Basil was always so irredeemably incapable of doing **anything** by himself.

The scariest part is how definitive it seemed. In that moment, when he was gripping that knife alone in the darkness, it felt as though that there really was no other way out. As though everything was closing in around him.

*Basil had snapped.* He had stretched his body and mind to the point of breaking, and almost lost to himself at the worst possible moment. He would have abandoned Sunny in a place and state of mind that would have killed him.

*That would change. Basil wouldn't scare or confuse Sunny anymore. He wouldn't make Sunny hurt himself anymore. He wouldn't keep hiding his wounds like he had. He wouldn't keep ruining everything. From this point forward, Basil was unbreakable.*

The blonde stares at the floor. If he focuses on the pain in his stomach, he can ignore the pain of having his hands restrained in this position. He can ignore the pain of Sunny's cruel lies buzzing around in his head.

*He's dizzy. He's lightheaded and he feels sick. But at least he doesn't have to stand up when he's restrained like this.* Basil hates to admit it, but he really does need to rest. The blonde lifts his gaze back off the ground.

Sunny had walked away a while ago. He had seemingly begun to exit the room, but suddenly apologized for something and then laid on the floor. He had laid down flat on his stomach. He rested silently in the doorway, the ceiling light in the other room illuminating his shrunken form while Basil sat alone in the darkened storage space.

It's very quiet in here. Sunny had been on the floor for a while now. He appeared to adjust himself slightly on occasion, but had finally stopped squirming a few minutes ago.

*Sunny is not moving anymore. Sunny has not moved for a long time.*

"Sunny?"

Sunny did not respond.

"Are y-you okay over there?"

*Silence.*

"H-Hey, Sunny? I'm s-sorry about the stuff I said. I didn't r-really mean it, okay? Will you p-please get up?"

*Sunny did not get up.*

Basil stands up. He can slide his wrists up and down on the metal bar frame he's been tied to, but the pole isn't coarse or serrated enough for the friction to do much of anything to the messy weave of tape that is constricting him. The blonde tries to get a better look at his friend who is lying still in the doorway.

**You did it. Smashed his face in with the door and tore him apart. Doesn't look like he's going to recover from this. You finished him this time.**

*Please just get up...*

**That argument you just had? That was it. You've been wondering how long this was all going to last? Well, you've got your answer now.**

*Please...*

**He's still breathing... say goodbye.**

*Basil starts cursing. He furiously hisses and growls and wails while straining to get the tape off of his wrists. He pulls his body away from the metal behind him and thrashes his arms. His feet slip slightly across the pillow beneath him.*

The enormous pillow rack tilts. In his strain to break free, he had begun to pull the entire shelf over. Basil only barely manages to turn his body over to the opposite side of the pole his hands are tied behind to avoid being crushed under the rack as it crashes to the ground, bringing the injured boy down with it. *It is excruciatingly loud. Pillows fall everywhere.*

"**SUNNY, GET UP**. PLEASE GET UP ***PLEASE"*** The boy whines in desperation, his arms being contorted strangely by his new position on the floor.

The effort of his body pulling forward and the impact of the frame hitting the floor stretched the tape that was constricting him, but his new position was even more painful.

Basil struggles to calm his breathing. His stomach hurts.

The tape had stretched just enough that Basil could now pull it over the slightly-wider metal edge where the pole met the bottom shelf. The shelf's joints had bolts in them, and the untreated metal had a rougher texture. This difference in texture created a bit of friction between the metal and the tape when Basil rotated his hands back and forth.

Basil started sawing away at his restraints with the very little he had available to him.

In the end, the tape did not split in half, but it stretched enough that Basil could violently force one of his hands free. The tape clung desperately to his wrist in an attempt to prevent his escape, but the boy just kept pulling. The tape stung his skin as he removed his right hand from its sticky grip, but he didn't care. Once he has one hand free, removing the other is little effort. Basil finishes freeing himself and dashes over to Sunny while the boy remained sprawled across the floor.

Sunny is still breathing, and he has a pulse, but its racing. Sunny looked pale. The bandage on his head that Basil had applied earlier was still red from reopening slightly when Basil bashed him in the face with the door, but he did not appear to be actively bleeding.

Basil rotates Sunny's body to the side so he can get a better look at his face.

"Hey S-Sunny? Can you hear me?"

His friend's eye opens. Sunny's eyelid just barely parts wide enough for the boy to look at him, but his pupil fails to focus on anything. Sunny doesn't look like he's exactly *awake.* The other boy looks extremely disoriented.

To Basil's horror, Sunny starts talking... but his voice sounds *wrong.* His words are mumbled and slurred again, nothing but empty ramblings that make no sense. Sunny didn't seem aware of himself or what was happening. It was as if he couldn't entirely regain lucidity. Now that his body had been flipped over, Sunny kept rubbing and scratching at his face as if there was something on his head that he was attempting to remove. *What is it? What's wrong with him?*

Basil moves in closer, trying to make sense of Sunny's slurred speech, but the boy suddenly pushes him away. Sunny weakly shoves Basil with his hands. The blonde subconsciously grabs Sunny's arm after his friend starts fighting him, but that only makes Sunny squirm more.

Sunny started trying to speak again. *This time, his words were a bit more coherent... but no less confusing.*

Sunny was horrified. *He seemed so deeply afraid of something... and he began* ***begging***. Sunny started begging the blonde to save his friend who was still tied up. He said he could take him away wherever he wanted, but just don't leave the other boy behind. Sunny begged him to save Basil.

*What?* No, Sunny... He **was** Basil. He was right here. Basil was *him.*

Sunny continued trying to bargain with him. He'd do anything, just please don't leave Basil here alone. The spiders were going to eat him. He just kept insisting... over and over.

*His voice became increasingly drained. Sunny continued deliriously begging Basil to save himself from a threat that didn't exist. He was crying.*

*Basil was going to go insane listening to this*.

**This is him, huh? The boy who hates you? Who has been hurting you on purpose?**

*It's going to be okay...*

**The one on the floor, pathetically begging someone to save you?**

*Stop... please stop struggling, Sunny... he's right here...*

The trembling flower boy grabbed Sunny's hand and reassured him that Basil was okay. Basil was going to be fine. Sunny didn't believe him.

But the younger boy also didn't seem to be capable of arguing anymore. Sunny falls silent.

Basil keeps softly rubbing his hand through Sunny's hair until his friend finally stops struggling. He stares quietly at Basil for a moment, perhaps experiencing some moment of clarity, before his eye closes again. Sunny's body goes limp... but his breathing is normal.

The blonde stands up and drags the blanket Sunny had thrown on him towards the doorway. He scans his eyes at the darkened storage space, and then through the doorway. In the small space between the staircase room and the storage room lies a vent that blows air near the ground. The air coming out of it feels warm, the heater in this building trying its best to return it to a livable temperature. Basil pulls Sunny through the doorway and places him down next to it, draping the blanket across his body.

He gingerly lifts up the boy's head and slides a pillow under him. His eyes flutter open for a moment, but quickly close again.

Basil walks back into the storage room and picks up a few things that had been scattered on the floor. He looks down at the disgusting red patch at the bottom of his shirt. *He didn't want to wear this anymore... but also didn't have anything else.*

*His stomach burns. Basil considers going up the stairs to the bathroom but the climb seems insurmountable at the moment.*

Basil had just eaten recently. Drank a lot. His body needed to make up for the blood he had lost, but it already had plenty to work with. He was going to be fine.

Even if that didn't end up being true, it wasn't as if he had much choice in the matter anyway. He couldn't keep going anymore.

*B-But what if someone is in here with them?*

... Nothing to be done about it.

Basil laid on the floor beside his friend. It actually felt a lot more comfortable than he expected. Maybe Sunny had been onto something. *Basil really should have been sleeping more all along... how ridiculous of him...*

In this moment, Basil can almost feel it. The warm summer breeze blowing in through the doorway. The four of them are sprawled across the floor of the treehouse, exhausted from the

day's efforts. Sunny lies on his left, and Aubrey peacefully snores on his right. She was always so cute, even when she slept. They're both really close. Basil is sandwiched in the middle, but there's nowhere else he'd rather be. Kel is at their feet, lying sideways with his arm outstretched across Sunny's legs. Sunny hadn't seemed bothered by it at all.

Basil might be the only one of them who was still awake. He's tired too, but he can't resist holding off the grasp of sleep a little longer... so he can listen to Mari and Hero's hushed conversation from the table beside them. They're so quiet... he just can't make out what they're saying. Hero bumps himself on something and Mari stifles a laugh. It sounds like the two of them are creeping out the door.

His eyes are closed, so she shouldn't have noticed. Basil didn't think that she could have realized he was still awake, but she was always perceptive like that.

"Goodnight, Basil." She whispers, a smirk audible in her voice.

Basil smiles.

*Goodnight, Mari.*

# Aftermath

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading. Have a nice day.

Sunny opens his eyes from a cold floor, but there's a blanket over him, and a pillow beneath his head.

Without even having to look, he already knows who placed it there, and his knowledge of the soft comfort it is meant to provide makes the boy experience a powerful surge of self-loathing. Sunny doesn't dare turn his head, because he can't help but hope in vain that his friend hadn't yet noticed that he has awoken. Warm air blows gently across Sunny's face from a vent in the wall beside him.

There are no freshly-hallucinated, spidery delusions plaguing Sunny in this waking moment, but in some ways the current situation feels even worse than his arachnophobic madness.

Sunny was suddenly forced to accept that maybe he wasn't much of an expert on tying people up. Maybe old electrical tape didn't make for the most functional handcuffs.

Basil is lying on the ground beside him, a moat of cold flooring splitting the ground between them. It's a small physical rift, just enough that they're… *safe from each other.* Not too close.

*The pair still share the same blanket, though.*

Sunny can hear him breathing. His breathing isn't shallow or panicked, broken or quickened... he sounds like himself. Basil takes in one more slow, deep breath. Despite Sunny's desire to be invisible, the blonde already knows he is awake.

Basil sits up and turns to look over him for a moment, before turning back and gently picking up something that was resting on the ground by his side.
Sunny opens his mouth to speak, but has no idea what he could possibly say. Never before in his entire life has the daunting act of communicating a single thought felt so impossible. He closes his mouth for a moment as Basil once again turns to look at his friend, but reopens it so he can try and fail to speak one last time before Basil preemptively silences him.

Sunny expects Basil might verbally interject before any sound leaves his throat, but the flower boy doesn’t need to.

*Basil doesn’t say anything*. He lets out a somber, empty smile and softly shakes his head, a finger set to his lips. He moves closer to Sunny and holds a bottle of water towards his face. Basil patiently waits until Sunny had leaned his face forwards before gently tilting the bottle

and allowing him to drink. Sunny swallows several times before Basil finally pulls the liquid away and allows him to take a breath.

Sunny wants to thank him but the phrase feels so hollow in his mind. Basil doesn't seem to wait for him either way, he just lifts the water once more and allows Sunny to drink again. The silent drinker feels like a child doing this. It's pathetic and embarrassing. Disgusting and undeserved. Part of him wished that Basil would just run away again.

While he is still taking another sip, Sunny's friend finally opens his mouth and speaks to him. The other boy seems… calm.

*"I'm sorry."* He begins.

"I... I get it. I understand why you wouldn't let me go. I r-really am sorry I didn't tell you, but... I just couldn't bring myself to. I got some sleep and I feel a little more... *better.* I'm not going to run away or f-freak out again. I promise."

*"I should have just told you about my stomach. I'm sorry."* He reiterated.

Sunny would have been incapable of meeting Basil's gaze right now, but the blonde isn't looking at him anymore either way. His friend stares blankly at something occupying the opposite side of the room, lost in thought.

"You aren't m-mad? That I wouldn't untie you?" Sunny nervously inquired.

"Of course not." The boy denies. "It's n-not like I could ever stay mad at you, Sunny." Basil smirked towards the wall.

"Besides, its not as if..."

Basil's head turns. Their vision is locked again.

Sunny could feel Basil's gaze slide across his missing eye. Even underneath the eyepatch and bandage… *Sunny felt very exposed in Basil's view.*

"...you didn't have any reason... to do something like that." He finishes.

Basil exhales, his gaze leaving the other boy's face once again. He places the water beside them and lies back down on the ground. Sunny wanted to say something, but it needed to be swift and delicate. He needed to fill the crack that was steadily building between them. He needed to apologize again for what he did… *and acknowledge Basil's distrust of him.*

"Basil-"

Sunny reaches out towards the blonde's unoccupied hand. He can just barely make out the shape of his friend's arm under the covers-

Basil moves it away instinctively.

"I d-don't think we s-should do that anymore." The flower boy evades him, his voice little more than a whisper.

"Oh... *right.* I'm sorry." Sunny apologizes.

Basil keeps staring at the wall, his expression empty.

*"It's okay, Sunny. We're going to be okay."* He whispers.

***Liar.***

"I'm sorry about all the stuff I said... It wasn't fair of me." Basil states.

"Not… *fair?"* Sunny inquired.

"Yeah." He confirmed.

"I-I know you d-don't…"

Basil trailed off, hesitant. He bit his lip.

"Hate you." Sunny finished the thought for him.

Basil paused again.

*"Right."* He exhaled slightly. "And... I s-said a lot of stuff I didn't mean." Basil apologized again.

The room was silent. Sunny hesitated for a moment.

*"You didn't mean any of that?"* Sunny requested clarification.

"No."

*The lie was blatant. It couldn't be any more obvious or outright. But Sunny understood why Basil was attempting to retract his resentment. Neither of them could afford to be fighting with one another right now. They had been losing both to the environment and to themselves. This act of cold, restrained diplomacy was likely in Sunny's best interest. If he was a smarter person than he was, Sunny would choose to simply take the olive branch and shut the fuck up.*

*But the boy couldn't help himself.*

"I meant what I said." Sunny plainly stated. "I didn't say anything I didn't mean. All of it was tr-"

"Sunny." Basil cut him off, turning to stare his friend dead in the face. "Don't do this."

"But I-"

“**No**. S-Stop. I don’t want to hear it." Basil took a strained breath. “I can’t do it. I can’t take any more of this right now. Please.”

*“Bas-“*

“**NO!**”

Basil was warning him.

A line had been drawn. A wall to protect them both from Sunny's mistakes. The feelings that Basil's friend had expressed would be quarantined away. That’s how it had to be. That’s how Basil would be safe from him.

Sunny let Basil cut him off this time, but doing so made him feel ill. A pit of hopeless, painful misery assembled itself within the boy's stomach. Basil turned away and took another shaky breath. The cold room returned to silence.

***A liar**. Basil thought his friend was a liar. Someone who was lying about their feelings to manipulate him. That’s how low Basil’s opinion was of Sunny now.*

But Basil still wanted them to… *get along.* Be okay together. For now, anyway.

This was the best deal Sunny was going to get. He should be grateful that he was getting this much.

The blonde sighed through his nose and rolled over. He didn’t have the patience, and Sunny didn’t have the words.

Basil's friend fell silent. He'd ruined everything again. He'd always end up breaking it all apart eventually.

Sunny stared across the room, slowly drifting his gaze back into the storage area and along the floor, searching desperately for something he had tossed away earlier. Something that wasn’t there.

*The knife was gone again.*

---

Time slowly marched forward as Sunny laid with his friend on the floor. He needed to rest, but there was seemingly little chance of him falling unconscious again with the constant buzzing inside his mind.

*Sunny couldn't stop thinking. He couldn't stop repeating Basil's caustic words in his head over and over again. His friend said he didn't mean those things, but that was untrue.*

Basil only restrained his anger at Sunny because he knows what a horrible nightmare they had both been through. But it wasn't as if Sunny didn't deserve all of it. It was possible Basil hadn't unloaded his feelings onto Sunny because he was still guilty over nearly killing him, but that didn't mean Basil had no reason to be upset with his friend. Maybe spending so long together without discussing the worst aspects of their shared past had been a mistake. *If Sunny had just addressed those things earlier like he should have, would all of this still be happening?*

Sunny had long been afraid of it. He had been deeply afraid of the idea that Basil would hate him if they ever spoke again. That he would resent Sunny for leaving him alone with the truth for so long. For a while, he had worried those fears would soon come true.

But in the hospital, that paralyzing dread began to fade. His ceaseless insecurities and gnawing regrets were no match for Basil's soft, tired smile. Sunny had wondered how much Basil might have changed over those four years, but to his relief the flower boy he knew seemed almost exactly the same. He might have been shy, awkward and reserved, but if Sunny got him talking he almost seemed to become a kid again. Then Sunny followed suit.

After the second time Sunny snuck into Basil's room while they were hospitalized, he was almost overwhelmed by a simple conversation with his friend. It was something he had dreamed about for so long, but began to feel was unachievable as his nightmares ebbed on and on. Seeing Basil again was a wish that his mind started to give up on as his guilt grew back to consume him, over and over again. Even now that the boy was right in front of him, every moment with Basil still felt like one of his hallucinations.

*Would Basil hate him? Would Basil hate him even more if he admitted that, for a long time, he had dissociated so much from himself that he couldn't even consciously remember what had happened? The horrid actions he had taken?*

In a way, that had been the ultimate blessing. If he was still conscious of it at the time, the ceaseless guilt and self-hatred would have likely prevented Sunny from opening the door for Kel when he knocked that day. It was only because his mind had allowed him to hide the truth away from himself that Sunny managed to gain any sense of closure from his friends... or that he managed to see Basil again.

They had been laying there on the floor for a long time now. Sunny's body was too exhausted to stand up, and his mind was too fragile to speak.

Basil didn't talk any more. He had rolled over onto his side, and stared at the other end of the room with his back facing Sunny. Sunny was honestly just surprised he didn't run away again. *Maybe that was a good sign… maybe Basil would forgive him if he finally controlled himself.*

*But Basil was angry.*

For a while it seemed to Sunny as if his friend might have been crying, but if he was, the tears had been so restrained and well-hidden that the rest of the world could not tell. Maybe Basil's shoulders were shaking because he was cold, maybe because he was in pain…

Sunny wanted to reach out to Basil, but he was afraid of what the other boy might say. He wanted to comfort Basil the way that Basil always comforted him, but he was far too terrified that his desperation would only make everything worse again. Basil had made himself clear.

*A line had been drawn.*

***Should he cross it?*** *Would it really be better to just ignore Basil's boundaries once more? Basil would hate him… but maybe it didn't matter.*

*Sunny could no longer entirely trust that Basil was safe alone with himself. Sunny was afraid of even falling asleep again, now mortified by the possibility of waking up to an empty room.*

*Would it only become more and more difficult to reach Basil as time went on? Should Sunny just reject Basil's detachment immediately?*

Sunny glanced back over at his friend's quiet form. *Something about the way Basil was breathing seemed different now…*

Sunny was initially somewhat amazed when he realized that Basil had in fact fallen asleep beside him, but it shouldn't have been that surprising. Even if they were stuck in the middle of terrible, stressful circumstances, Basil's body couldn't continue suffering his abuse forever. It was inevitably going to shut itself down eventually, *and now it had.*

*That was good. That was really good.* Basil needed to sleep. He needed to sleep for as long as he wanted. Sunny hoped he was dreaming of something beautiful... something that could take him anywhere other than here.

The boy was scared to move anymore. His own body had grown uncomfortable of this current position on the floor, but Sunny was afraid that if he moved even a little that Basil would wake up again. Sunny's head throbbed. He would do anything for whatever numbing drug they had been shoveling into his mouth while he was still in the hospital. Over-the-counter pedestrian painkillers were not nearly enough for the suffering they were both in, especially after everything that had happened. It was no wonder Basil took so much.

Sunny accidentally imagined the wound again, and had to try and calm himself down. The fact that Basil's abdomen was still just... *split in half* like that while he was calmly napping on the ground felt like some kind of bad joke.

Basil was sleeping right now, so surely the wound couldn't hurt him too terribly? At least he could rest…

Sunny felt his hands twitching.

*Could he take it? Could he take the knife back from Basil while he was asleep? Where had he hidden it? Was it back in his pocket again?*

Would Basil be angry with him? Would Basil be angry if Sunny tried to steal the weapon he had? Was there even a point? Could Sunny really keep Basil from doing something bad given the condition he was in himself?

Sunny felt his eyes attempt to close. It wasn't any use. He was never able to help his friend at all. If he tried to quarantine Basil again he would only make the blonde resent him even more.

Basil wouldn't hurt himself like that. Ignoring his wound was one thing, but turning that knife on his stomach was another. Sunny was just too scared, and that fear was making him paranoid. Basil was acting lucid again… and Sunny could trust him now... *right?*

*But Sunny had watched Basil do it himself. Basil dug his fingers into that wound. He had been so desperate to stay awake, his mind appearing to have completely unraveled...*

Basil said he was better now, but could Sunny really trust that? Even if he couldn't... was there anything he could actually do about it?

*Sunny wasn't faring much better himself. He tried to ignore the memories he now had of what it might feel like to be buried under a blanket of spiders.*

*Legs. So many legs.*

...

Sunny wondered if he could make it upstairs to the bathroom by himself. Probably not right now.

...

The dreamer closed his eye, and tried to imagine how he could properly apologize to Basil after the other boy woke up. He was once again drawn to imagine what his old friends would do if they were in his place, but those desperate imaginings died out even quicker than last time. None of them would ever have ended up in a situation like this. None of them would ever have made the kinds of mistakes that he did.

Sunny had always been by far the most selfish amongst his friends. He would pretend to care, but in reality he only claimed he did as an excuse to continue being the way he already was... ceaselessly attempting to prevent people from relying on him, because all asking Sunny for support would do was highlight his own weakness and self-interest.

He didn't even think about it. He didn't even stop to think for a moment how Basil was going to feel about Sunny **shoving himself in his friend's mouth**.

***He was sick**. The fact that he was still acting this way after everything he'd done was proof something was seriously wrong with him.*

Sunny felt that painful urge to retreat into his dreams again, into a world that he could remake no matter how many times it was ruined... but he knew he couldn't. Instead, he laid back and tried to imagine what kind of life Basil might have lived if he had simply never met him in the first place. He wanted to see Basil happy, but the only way he knew to accomplish that was inside his own head.

*The blonde sits at a picnic table, surrounded by a group of friends that Sunny wouldn't know. They listen to him talk enthusiastically about his garden while he smiles. The wind ruffles his hair as he laughs in that just-so-slightly-restrained way he always does.*

*Basil watches one of his younger friends play with a jump rope and sneaks himself a quick photo, because playing is all it is. That was just a rope people use to play games, and nothing more.*

# Stairs

*Basil wakes up again.* The gentle dreams kept turning into nightmares, and the nightmares kept shaking him from his sleep. What little rest he got only seemed to make him more exhausted.

Someone is moving around beside him. The occasional awkward, restrained motion ruffles the covers slightly. Sunny is awake. If Basil turns around right now, his friend will be right there by his side.

...

Alternatively, Basil could just pull the blanket over his head and wait to die. Spare them both the pain and embarrassment.

...

But of course he couldn't, because the condition Sunny was in was Basil's fault. Sunny's friend would do well to remember that. No matter what awful things his friend had been doing, *Basil had already performed far worse*.

Sunny's tiny movements seem to suddenly become very restrained, as if hidden. He had definitely noticed that Basil had awoken.

"Are you doing okay?" The blonde inquires, incapable of tolerating the continued silence. *No more fighting. Not right now.*

*"I need to go to the bathroom."* Sunny admits, his voice small and quiet.

...

"But I don't think I can... *stand up by myself."*

"Okay." The blonde replied. "Just give me a sec."

Basil wriggled to the side of the blanket and started to stand, his legs trembling a bit before recomposing themselves. Sunny sat upwards, seemingly straining himself to move his head from the pillow. Basil turned towards the other boy and held out his hand to help him up. Sunny reached towards him for a moment, but then recoiled his hand slightly.

*Basil was a bit confused by his friend's hesitance before he remembered what he had said earlier.*

"It's um... *It's okay.* You c-can grab it." Basil insisted, feeling extremely embarrassed at the words leaving his mouth.

Sunny silently let out a weak nod and grabbed the outstretched hand.

Sunny was not heavy, he was in fact disturbingly light, which was one of the only reasons Basil had been able to relocate his unconscious body several times since they had arrived.

However, in this particular moment, Basil felt himself straining to help Sunny up at all. His own arms were weak, and his legs wobbled beneath him. Basil had to grab his other arm to hold himself steady as Sunny attempted to get on his own two feet. Once they were both upright, the pair only managed to take a single step forwards before Sunny began to awkwardly tilt towards the ground. Basil immediately stopped moving and allowed him to reorient himself.

"Are you okay?"

"Y-Yeah." Sunny stuttered.

The two resumed walking, but keeping themselves steady was a considerable effort. It seemed to be an almost herculean task. Basil had been so focused on just staying upright that he head forgotten about the stairway ahead of them.

It was possible that there was another bathroom down in the rest of the warehouse they had not explored earlier, but neither were in any condition to be wandering around down there in an extended search for a bathroom. Besides, then they'd have to climb all the way back up again, and that slope was even longer.

The only restrooms available to them were upstairs. There were no other options.

"Are y-you ready?" Basil asked at the bottom of the stairway, trying to ignore the now-blackened bloodstain that cursed the ground beneath their feet.

"Yeah." Sunny confirmed. They began their ascent.

Their crawl upward was slower and more miserable than any before it. Basil hated these stairs. He hated having his feet on them. Every second spent climbing them alongside his friend made Basil feel ill.

They only made it a little less than halfway up the stairs before Sunny asked if they could stop for a moment. He began the process of sitting himself down before Basil could even reassure him that it was fine.

Sunny sat on the stairs with his head held downward, seemingly staring at the bloodstain they had created and then repeatedly ignored.

*"Sunny, don't look at that, okay?"* Basil requested. The empty look on Sunny's face was scaring him a little.

"Um, just... *look at me instead."*

Sunny turns and looks at him, shaking slightly. Basil lands under his friend's gaze. *No, turns out that's worse.*

"Actually w-why don't you just c-close your eyes... *eye*. ***Eyelids***". Basil repeatedly corrects himself. *Fucking idiot.*

They sat on that particular step for about two minutes before Sunny stated he was ready to resume climbing. The next climb was much shorter, with the pair only making it about five steps upward before Sunny requested to stop again, head held in his hands.

Basil sat beside him silently once more, trying to ignore the crippling pain in his stomach. it occasionally burned so much it made him feel dizzy.

Sunny was still shaking, now worse than before. Basil's eyepatched friend was trembling like a leaf in the wind. From the looks of it, Sunny didn't seem as though he was going to be prepared to move again anytime soon. This was awful.

Basil knew that Sunny would need help standing again eventually, but sitting on these stairs while doing nothing made him feel incredibly anxious. The blonde began to feel rather impatient.

"Hold on, Sunny... let me get you the blanket so you don't freeze while you're sitting here-"

Basil started creeping back down the stairs to grab the floor blanket that had been left behind in the opposite room.

Basil tried to lump the blanket together into a ball so he could relocate it... *but the total mass of the fabric was too much.* Maybe it was a bit too big to throw on Sunny's shoulders. This was not the best idea.

Basil decided it was probably a better plan to climb up the stairs and come down with something for Sunny to wrap himself with rather than crushing him with this blanket, assuming he wasn't ready to continue their ascent by now. Once they were upstairs, they'd probably go back to the display bedroom anyway. The floor down here did not make for the best overall mattress.

Basil quickly turned back to the other room, picking a bit of tape off his wrist as he approached the stairway again.

To the boy's discomfort, he caught Sunny in the act of trying to crawl up the stairs himself. He wasn't standing up, but was still seemingly intent on moving upwards in his friend's absence.

Sunny turned to look at Basil standing near the bottom of the stairs and locked eyes with him. That glance lasted only a brief moment before the boy turned his head back around and resumed his pathetic upward crawl like an injured animal.

Basil quietly ascended the staircase again and crept up beside his friend.

"S-Sunny.. *what are you doing?"*

"... Climbing."

"Very funny."

Basil waited for Sunny to stand back up again and turned his head away while offering the other boy his hand. They resumed their shared ascent once more.

Basil couldn't really blame Sunny for trying to creep up the stairs himself. Having to hold each other steady right now was incredibly, painfully awkward. Basil tried to think about anything other than Sunny's face and **lips** invading his very, **very** personal space.

... *And tongue*. Lips **and** tongue. Basil felt nauseous.

**You could've just played along with him. Even if he doesn't really feel that way... does it matter? It isn't as if you have any right to be picky. Maybe he'd let you take it back...**

*The blonde's heartbeat felt dysregulated.*

**He was so warm... I miss having someone to touch... it felt so...**

*Basil continued ignoring himself.*

The pair finally reach the top of the stairs. They're on a flattened surface again. Basil gazes down the long hall back into the lobby.

"Do you think you're going to be alright from here or d-do you want to sit down again?" Basil inquired.

Sunny shook his head. He could keep going.

They kept walking. Basil stared down at their feet, trying to remember why he hadn't-

---

*"Hey! Wake up! Hey!"*

*Huh?*

*Someone is shaking his shoulder. It's Sunny. Basil had fallen asleep. Why was Sunny waking him up? He's tired. Sunny was the one who kept insisting he get to sleep. Come on...*

"Are you okay?" Sunny asks.

"Yeah?" Basil responds.

"Then why are you sleeping in the bathroom..."

*Huh? Bathroom?*

*Bathroom.* He was sitting upright on the tile floor. The stall door was open. This was the restroom which sat adjacent to the windowed hall that ran along the front of the building. Basil had felt like he might throw up again... and so he went to the restroom and leaned over the toilet for a while. He glanced at the bowl. Seemed empty.

Basil felt as though he had just been helping his friend ascend the stairs, but that was hours ago at this point. The blonde was lightheaded.

Sunny was standing behind him, having apparently inserted himself into Basil's personal sleeping stall... *Sunny was standing behind him? No. Nonono. Sunny couldn't walk. He should be back in bed right now.* What the heck did he think he was doing?

"I'm okay. W-Why are you out of bed right now, Sunny?" Basil asked.

"I mean, you said you were probably going to throw up and then you never came back. Was I supposed to just stay in bed and wait for you?"

Basil was going to insist to Sunny that it was important he stay off his feet... *but the blonde was having difficulty paying much attention to him.* Basil rubbed at the side of his neck. Falling asleep in all these ridiculous places was not doing any favors for his unfortunate posture.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Sunny asked again, noting the other boy's lack of response.

"Yeah... it doesn't look like I actually threw up, anyway. I'm okay."

"And how about... *mentally?"* The boy stared at him.

"Oh um, I'm... fine. Sunny." The blonde awkwardly forced out. "Just need to s-sleep, like you said."

For a moment, Basil had almost forgotten. For a few seconds, it just seemed like they were each part of a somewhat-decent conversation between two sick individuals in a bad situation. Just Sunny checking on where Basil had gone. Seeing if he was okay.

Sunny was leaning in towards him, probably trying to get a look at his face before he woke as the boy was shaking Basil's shoulders.

*Then Basil remembered. He recalled what had happened last time they were alone in the bathroom with one another. The pair stared at each other. Basil's heart quickened and palpitated in a way that felt particularly unpleasant. His anxiety spiking instantaneously in response to his sudden acknowledgement of reality.*

Sunny wasn't saying anything, he was just staring at him. Frozen in place. He seemed to have noticed what Basil had noticed, and now had locked up entirely.

"Sunny."

Sunny stared at him.

"P-Please back up."

*"**Right**."* Sunny moved away from the stall slightly, but stopped before exiting Basil's vision entirely. He turned back. Basil's friend looked extremely uncomfortable.

"You um, might want to wash your face." Sunny stated.

"My face?" Basil asked.

Sunny scratched at the back of his arm.

"You had laid your head down on the toilet seat when I found you."

*Huh?*

Basil's gaze rotated back to look at his rounded, porcelain pillow before his brain finally registered what Sunny had said.

*"Eww! Eww EWWW EWWW!"*

Basil practically dashed out of the stall and started rubbing hand soap all over his probably-disease-ridden face. He felt like he was going to scream.

Sunny moved slightly more towards the door, appearing to be patiently waiting for Basil to finish thoroughly disinfecting every single pore on his skin. The blonde watched him silently standing in place through his reflection in the bathroom mirror. Sunny noticed him glancing and glanced back.

"Looks like neither of us are doing the best right now, huh." He said. Sunny might have meant it as some kind of joke, but his tone was so miserable that it only came off like a pathetic cry for mercy. One the universe would seemingly ignore.

"S-Sunny will you please sit down. Just watching you standing there is really putting me on edge. You're going to fall over..." Basil grumbled.

"Sit down on the bathroom floor like you? *No thanks...*" Sunny silently crept out of the bathroom. He wobbled slightly as he walked back into the hall.

Basil tried to ignore the burning sensation in his face as he obliterated himself with liquid hand soap. Basil wanted to die. Maybe if he scrubbed hard enough the embarrassment would come off, too. It seemed as if they only saw the worst parts of each other now. A slow decline into mutual disgust, surely. Maybe they had both already arrived.

The soap creature finally gave up. His face wasn't going to get any cleaner than this. Basil dried his head off with a fistful of jagged, uncomfortable paper towels and then quickly walked back into the hall, insistent on making sure that Sunny wasn't moving around by himself.

Basil approached him from behind and grabbed his hand. If he did it quickly and wordlessly neither of them would have to think about it. Sunny just needed help walking, and that was that. Basil didn't have time to be embarrassed about Sunny's stupid mock affection.

"How's your stomach?" Sunny inquired.

*Basil's hand twitched.*

"It actually isn't that bad. It always hurts the worst right after I eat. I think it just... s-stretches out."

"But you still needed to throw up?"

"I had been throwing up for a lot longer than... all of this."

"Oh."

Sunny stared out the window at the snow-blanketed truck as they began to walk back to their solemn base of operations. The sun had been up for a while now, trying its best to illuminate the parking lot outside but its rays were being effectively fought off by the dense shell of clouds hanging in the sky. It was well into Monday morning by now, and there was no sign of anyone showing up to work. Nobody was here.

"Basil. Nobody is coming." Sunny exhaled.

"Mm." The blonde quietly hummed in agreement.

"I'm sorry."

"L-Let's just go back to bed for now, okay?"

*"Okay."*

# Talking it Out

They had left the ceiling light on. Neither of them wanted to be in the dark anymore, and they were so exhausted that it likely wouldn't have any effect on their ability to fall sleep. The natural beam coming in through the window would have illuminated the room more effectively if not for the grey clouds looming in the skies outside. At the very least, it had stopped snowing for now. *The wind was no less agitated, however.*

Neither had yet fallen asleep. Sunny was exhausted... but his mind remained entirely insistent on preventing rest. He tried to ignore the occasional massive spider crawling across the wall. If it was really **real**, Basil would've noticed the arachnid and commented on it. That spider did not exist. *It didn't.*

In the grand scheme of things, being buried alive under spiders somehow didn't feel like anything close to Sunny's biggest problem right now.

Sharing a bed with Basil had always been fairly awkward before, but after Sunny had k-

*Kis-*

After Sunny did what he did, the tension in the air had become so thick it made the boy feel like simply breathing had become a tremendous effort. He had only continually made things worse for the both of them over and over since they had arrived. Because of what he did, Basil had a panic attack in the storage room... so Sunny then restrained Basil... which led to Sunny's friend blowing up at him... which triggered a return to Sunny's dissociative hallucinations... which led t-

Sunny was caught off guard when Basil suddenly spoke.

"... What did you even do?"

"Do?" Sunny responded.

"While you were alone in your house all those years. Didn't you get... lonely?" Basil inquired about the time he spent in his home. The blonde's voice was quiet and somber.

*Sunny's eye twitched. Basil hadn't asked about this yet. Why was he suddenly bringing this up? Sunny felt a shiver pass through his arms.*

Sunny had to assume this sudden questioning had something to do with what he'd said earlier. Back at the hospital, Sunny didn't want to talk about it... mostly because he didn't know how it would make Basil feel. Sunny had been avoiding almost every topic that he thought would make what had happened any more difficult for his friend than it already had been.

"Yeah." Sunny confirmed. He was lonely.

"I had... kept myself busy, though. So I wouldn't have to think about any of it." The boy muttered.

"B-Busy? *Doing what?"* Basil scrunched his nose.

Sunny hesitated. Telling Basil he had spent so much time asleep felt shitty considering how much harder things must have been for him while Sunny was busy running away.

"... Sleeping."

"Sleeping?"

"Because it was such a nightmare to be awake."

"Mm." The blonde hummed in agreement. Basil understood that.

"So you were just sleeping... all the time?" He inquired, the specific emotion hinting in his voice not quite becoming clear to Sunny.

"Not all the time... but most of it." Sunny admitted.

"What did you dream about?" Basil asked.

...

*"I already told you."* Sunny mumbled sheepishly.

"... Right." The blonde shuffled around slightly.

Sunny couldn't tell if Basil sounded upset or just depressed.

The eyepatched teen listened to the wind blowing outside and imagined the frigid air flowing freely through the throbbing pain that pulsated inside his head.

*"Did you dream about anyone else?"* The blonde asked in a quiet voice.

"Hero. Kel. Aubrey..." Sunny listed them out. "All of our friends."

...

*"Mari."*

Basil quietly nodded.

"I dreamt of pretty much everyone, actually. Kim and Vance and everyone else."

"Did you ever dream about your parents?"

*Huh? His parents?*

His parents couldn't fit inside his idealized headspace... his perfect world didn't have a place for them. He forced them out. Sunny was a bad kid.

"... No." He denied.

"Oh."

"Why? Do you ever dream about your parents?" Sunny asked.

...

"Sometimes." Basil confirmed.

Sunny waited patiently to see if Basil was going to continue.

"I don't want to talk about it." He stated.

"Okay."

"What do you usually dream about?" Sunny inquired further.

*"... Let's talk about something else."* Basil evaded.

...

"Actually, we don't have to talk about anything. "The blonde stated, exhaling slightly. "We can both just focus on getting some rest for now."

"Oh." Sunny mumbled.

Silence.

"I was kind of enjoying talking to you, though."

*Basil tensed up for a moment. He seemed to be a bit on-edge now.*

"*Okay?* Uhh..." The blonde thought out loud.

"D-Did you get to see Hector again? When you were hanging around town with Kel?" He asked.

"Yeah. He hadn't changed a bit." Sunny confirmed.

"Remember that time he ruined one of my photos?"

"I remember Kel said he just wanted to be in on the shot, too."

"Well, he definitely succeeded." Basil smirked. The boy paused for a moment.

"It always b-blew my mind how tall they both got. Kel and Hero."

"Towering." Sunny agreed.

"Did you get to meet Kel's little sister?" Basil inquired.

"Yeah." Sunny confirmed. "Did you ever meet her?" He returned the question.

"No. I just s-saw Kel's mom... you know. *Around."*

"Did Kel ever... knock on your door?" Sunny asked, hesitant.

"No."

*Sunny felt a slight tinge of nausea.*

"... But I wasn't moving away." Basil elaborated.

*"That's...* true." Sunny conceded.

"Is there anything you're looking forward to?" Basil asked. The conversation itself moved elsewhere.

"What?" Sunny didn't understand.

"After you move, I mean. Is there anything you're looking forward to doing?" Basil asked him.

*"What?* No." Sunny flatly denied.

"Huh?" The blonde seemed confused.

"Basil, I don't **want** to move."

"Yeah but... *why not?"* The boy asked.

*"I already told you."* Sunny muttered once more.

*"Right."* Basil let out a slight exhale through his nose.

"I used to think about it." Sunny's friend stated. "What it would be like to move somewhere else and leave everything b-behind. Just... become someone else, far away from Faraway."

Sunny turned to look at Basil's face for a moment, but the other boy remained staring upwards at the ceiling.

"But even if the opportunity came up, I knew I'd never be able to actually do it."

"Why couldn't you?" Sunny asked.

*"... All of it."*

...

"It wouldn't have m-mattered, anyway." Basil admitted.

"It wouldn't?"

"No. No matter where you go... or where you run... you're still... *you."* The blonde's shoulders shook slightly.

*Sunny nodded. That was true.*

Sunny was so tired of being himself. But he was glad that Basil had remained the same.

"I was really worried that you'd be... *different."* Sunny stated.

"Different?" Basil inquired.

"I was worried that when I started talking to you again, that you would have changed a lot from back when I first met you." He clarified. "I wasn't sure if you'd be the same person that you were."

*"I didn't change at all."* Basil mumbled under his breath, eyebrows knit.

"Not even a little?"

"No."

"Good." Sunny smirked to himself.

*"Good?"*

"Yeah."

"Are you making fun of me?" Basil turned to glare at him, seemingly annoyed.

*"What? No?"*

"okay." Basil muttered.

The room went quiet for a while. Basil seemed kind of mad.

Sunny thought about what had just been said. He felt it was a bit odd that Basil had never once asked him **where** he was moving to. That kind of upset Sunny a bit, but he didn't want to bring it up casually if... *Basil just didn't want to know*. *Sunny couldn't assume that he did. Of course he couldn't.*

*"Sorry."* Sunny apologized.

"Sorry for w-what?"

"Take your pick."

Basil laughed. It was kind of a tired laugh, but it was nice to hear.

"It's okay... I forgive you."

*Sunny's pulse suddenly increased at those words. They spiraled around his head, constricting his broken brain from the inside.*

...

"Forgive me for what?" He nervously inquired.

"Whatever it is that I just picked."

"Secret, huh?"

*"Y-Yeah."* Basil smiled slightly.

Sunny continued asking questions, hoping Basil would humor him.

"Do you like her? That lady who lives with you? Polly?"

"Oh, um... **yeah**!" Basil confirmed. "She's very... *nice."*

"Almost too nice sometimes, haha..." Basil laughed awkwardly.

"She's very good at helping people see the bright side of bad things. I really admire that." He admitted.

"Do you think Polly will be able to take care of all your plants for you while we're out here?" Sunny asked.

Basil scratched his face. "P-Probably not. There sure are a lot of them... and I can't blame her if she doesn't have the time for it."

"... Besides, I hadn't exactly been taking the best care of them myself, r-recently."

"Oh."

"It's funny... I've lived with her for years, but I still feel like I barely know anything about her. I feel like maybe I should've apologized for not trying harder... to get to know her while I could."

*The room went silent. Basil stared at the ceiling.*

"Everyone's probably really worried about us." Basil smiled sadly.

*"Maybe not everyone."* Sunny mumbled.

Basil's somber smile faded.

"... Maybe not."

...

*"Sorry."* Sunny apologized.

...

"It's okay. That's true, isn't it?"

...

"Your mom is probably worried." Basil stated. His tone was strained.

"... Yeah."

...

"I feel really bad." Sunny admitted.

"Hm?"

"I didn't finish the chores she left me."

*"Haha..."* Basil let out a weak laugh.

"You'll have to apologize to h-her when you get back." He said.

...

"Well, they technically did end up getting done *eventually*..." Sunny clarified, guiltily smirking to himself.

Basil moved around slightly on the mattress. "So you **did** finish them?"

"I didn't... Hero did." Sunny admitted.

...

Basil let out a half-laugh. "R-Really?"

"Yeah."

...

"... I never even thanked him. For pulling us out." The gardener mumbled, his tone gently returning to its prior misery.

...

*Sunny couldn't think of anything to say to that, so he just continued silently staring at nothing.*

---

The minutes ticked by in silence. Sunny watched as Basil twisted off the cap of the liquid painkiller once again and took a small sip of it straight from the bottle, not bothering to spoon-feed it to himself this time.

"Are you sure its okay for you to take more of that stuff?" Sunny inquired, his face scrunching in discomfort at seeing Basil drink more and more painkiller. *Had it really been long enough for him to be taking **another** dose?*

"No." Basil admitted. "It doesn't really work all that well, anyway. I'm just going to take a tiny bit."

"Yeah. It kind of doesn't." Sunny agreed.

"Do you want any?" Basil inquired.

"No thank you." His friend denied.

*Sunny didn't deserve it, anyway.* The floor-lover focused on the dull ache in the back of his skull.

"They gave me something back in the hospital, for the pain in my eye. That stuff worked a lot better." Sunny reminisced back to a time of numbed suffering.

"Y-Yeah. I didn't realize how much it was going to hurt after we stopped getting whatever it was they were g-giving us." Basil agreed.

"Well, we would've probably still been on it right now." Sunny thought out loud.

"Probably."

Basil took a drink from the water he got from the tap and coughed into his arm. He was probably recoiling from the terrible taste that medication had.

There was another minute worth of silence before Basil spoke again.

"Grandma used to give me this... *stuff*."

"Stuff?"

"*Yeah.* If I ever got sick really bad, or had gotten a nasty cut on something, she'd give me this stuff. She just said it was a painkiller... so I never knew what it was at the time. I just knew it worked." Basil elaborated.

Sunny tentatively nodded along. This story was moving in a somewhat discomforting direction so far.

"It turns out that it was a medication of hers. S-Something to help her deal with her joint pain after she got her hip replacement. I asked h-her if it was really okay for her to be giving me that stuff but she said she didn't need it that much. I asked her if it was safe and she said that *'back in her day'* people used to take stuff like it all the time."

"So... *what was it?"* Sunny asked.

"I don't remember exactly what she called it... but Polly told me what it was. She said it was way too strong to give to a kid. Polly was actually really mad when she found out that Granny used to give that stuff to me. That was the one time I ever saw her get angry like that."

*Sunny struggled to imagine what the confrontation looked like.*

"Grandma apologized and said she didn't know it was d-dangerous. The rest of the medication was really old at that time, so I think Polly just got rid of it."

"That's kind of scary."

"A l-little bit." The blonde agreed. "That drug d-definitely worked, though."

...

Basil restlessly shifted around on the mattress, reorienting himself on occasion by fidgeting to the side or squirming his legs. The blonde scratched at his face for a moment.

*He didn't know why... but Sunny suddenly couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. The boy felt a creeping discomfort climb onto his shoulders as Basil continued speaking. Sunny's friend finally stopped moving.*

"S-She actually gave some of that stuff to **you** once, when we were younger." Basil said. He spoke a bit more softly than he had before.

The hairs on the back of Sunny's neck suddenly stood up. Something about Basil's tone was different. More restrained. *Unsure. Hesitant.*

*"She did?"* Sunny asked, trying not to sound put-off or disturbed.

"Yeah." Basil confirmed.

"Was I sick?"

*"... Yeah."*

The room fell silent. Sunny wasn't sure what he should ask next, if anything.

*"Do you remember that?"* Basil quietly mumbled.

"No... sorry. I don't think I do."

Sunny might have imagined it. It might have just been his mind playing tricks on him, but he could have sworn Basil had whispered something under his breath. A word so faint it had barely been spoken. A microscopic utterance that should not have been heard by anyone other than himself.

*"... Good."*

*Good? Why was that good? It was good he had forgotten? What?*

Basil suddenly tossed around in the bed, as if he had freed himself from something.

"I'm actually a little bit jealous!" Out of nowhere, Basil spoke rather enthusiastically. His tone was quite forced, and the instantaneous change in demeanor was jarring.

"Huh? Of what?" Sunny was confused. He wondered if he had done something wrong.

"You said you had spent a lot of time in your house sleeping, right?" Basil said "S-Sometimes I feel like I can barely sleep even when I'm exhausted, haha..."

Sunny stared at him.

*"... A-Anyway."* Basil brushed himself off, embarrassed.

---

"Are you s-seeing something right now? Hallucinating?"

*Sunny practically jumped.* They had not spoken in a while, and Sunny had just been nervously watching spiders build up on the walls. He wasn't aware that Basil had been watching him just now. *How did Basil even notice what he was doing?*

"I, Uh-" Sunny struggled to speak through his surprise.

"You kept talking about 'spiders' earlier."

"Spiders?" Sunny tried to play it off.

His hallucinations had been coming back in full force. Every subsequent knock on his head only seemed to make him increasingly delusional.

"Yeah." Basil confirmed. "You kept scratching at yourself like you were trying to get something off of your skin. S-Scratching and talking about spiders."

Sunny thought back to the person he had been begging to save Basil. He couldn't remember if he had actually said any of that stuff... *out loud.*

*He felt blood start to build up in his face. He turned his neck slightly in hopes that Basil couldn't tell.*

"Is... that all I said?"

Basil paused before responding.

"... Yeah, that was about it." The blonde claimed. "Were you scared?"

*Yeah. He was.* Sunny thought for a moment.

"It felt like I was being crushed. Like I was just lying on the ground doing nothing, but I couldn't raise my arms. I couldn't push myself up or move my legs. I just kept waking up over and over, but I could never do anything about it..."

Basil didn't say anything in return. The room was quiet. Sunny suddenly felt worried that he might have been freaking Basil out with his delusions. He rotated his head just enough to glance at the other boy's face. Basil had a tentative expression. His eyes had widened slightly. Something was definitely running through his mind.

Sunny looked away, hopeful that Basil hadn't noticed him peeking.

"Basil?" Sunny finally asked.

"S-Sorry. Something about what you said just felt really familiar for some reason." The blonde claimed.

"Familiar? Like in what way?"

"I..."

*Basil hesitated.*

"I'd forgotten, but... I had this dream. A dream that was kind of like what you were describing."

"A nightmare?"

"No, it was actually kind of a nice dream, at first." Basil claimed. "I was just... *about to take a nap*. I was resting on the floor of our old treehouse."

"The treehouse?"

"Yeah."

"And, um... you all were there. You and our friends."

*Oh.*

"But then the dream... changes. Then I'm in a tiny room. A tiny room that doesn't have any doors or windows. I think you were actually in the room with me, but it was almost too dark to see anything." The boy elaborated.

"I want to get up but I can't move at all. I look around and try to make out shapes in the darkness, but I can't tell if they're real or not. I just keep struggling to move... I try to scream but I can't for some reason-"

Basil turns his head to glance at Sunny and notices the other boy was already looking at him.

"*Um,* anyway." He finishes. "S-Sorry. I don't really want to talk about dreams."

"Are you sure?" Sunny prods him.

"Yeah."

Sunny mulled over what Basil had told him. *Had Basil told him about that dream before? He felt like Basil told him that but he had forgotten. But it didn't make sense that he wouldn't remember something like that...* Sunny had been putting so much effort into remembering things recently.

*Remembering things*. He remembered something else he needed to tell Basil. It was important... but Sunny had been avoiding it. He kept pushing it backwards, deeper into his skull.

*Sunny hesitated.* He wasn't sure if he wanted to say this now. *After Basil had been refusing himself sleep, fighting with Sunny, screaming and panicking...* maybe it really would be better to hide some things from him.

"Basil?"

"Hm?"

"Can I tell you something about... *my hallucinations?"*

"Of course, Sunny." The blonde moved slightly. Sunny felt as if that had grabbed his friend's interest.

"Usually, I see stuff and its just... my memories. It doesn't really feel like what I'm seeing means anything or its going anywhere. Its just my brain replaying something that I thought I had forgotten. But it felt different that time. Back when I passed out in the snow, I mean. *I think...* I think I was trying to tell myself something. It felt like I was trying to remember some important detail but was never able to actually grasp it."

"I thought maybe Aubrey was trying to explain it to me- whatever it was that I was missing." Sunny elaborated.

"So, did you ever remember?" Basil finally spoke.

*Two. Two people walking. She swung her fingers back and forth.*

Sunny hesitated.

"Yeah. I think I r-remember it now." The boy said. "For a long time, I couldn't imagine how anyone could have taken us out of the hospital other than the doctors themselves."

*Basil stared at him.*

"But then I started thinking... maybe whoever drove us here didn't pick us up from the hospital."

"What do you mean?"

"I think... *I think we had snuck out."* Sunny claimed.

"We snuck out? Why would we do that?"

"I don't know. I don't remember."

"And... you're sure? You're sure we left the hospital ourselves?" Basil asked.

"No. It's just a feeling."

"But you're saying... you think someone else **did** t-take us here."

"I don't think either of us could have driven the truck." Sunny said.

Basil stared at the wall.

"... And I don't think we would have come out here ourselves."

"Do you think something bad happened? To whoever took us here?" The blonde inquired.

*"Maybe..."* Sunny thought to himself.

*"... But maybe that's a good thing."*

The wind outside suddenly roars in a particularly vicious fashion, as if it was taunting them both. Rubbing their faces in the horror that hung in the air around them.

*"S-Sunny, I'm scared..."* Basil whispered.

*Silence. Sunny wanted to reassure Basil somehow, but he had nothing to say. All of the words in his head felt hollow.*

"Hey, Basil?"

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry."

*"Sorry?"*

"I know you might not want to be stuck alone with me right now, but..." Sunny trailed off. "No more bathroom trips alone."

*"Okay."* Basil agreed.

---

"I wonder if the hospital has thrown away all the plants that were in my room by now." Sunny pondered aloud.

Basil chuckled. "T-They wouldn't do that, would they? Throw out a missing person's flowers? That's so rude."

"Maybe not, but there sure were a lot of them." Sunny noted. "I doubt the nurses are taking turns on greenhouse duty or anything." Basil hummed in response.

"Maybe the cactus is okay, at least. Kel could probably survive anything. Remember all those times he flew off the swingset and landed on his face?" Sunny smirked.

*"Kel?"* Basil questioned.

"Because Kel was the cactus, I mean."

Sunny heard Basil move his head. He turned to look at the blonde as the other boy suddenly stared at him.

"You... remember that?" Basil questioned.

"Remember what?"

"The plant I picked for Kel."

"Oh. Yeah, I still remember all of them." Sunny stated.

Basil continued staring at him, seeming as if he was trying to pick apart whether or not Sunny was telling the truth from his blank face. Sunny could have sworn that his friend's cheeks had pinkened slightly, but maybe that was his imagination.

"Did you really think I wouldn't remember?" Sunny inquired.

"No, I didn't think you would." Basil turned away again.

A few seconds passed in silence.

"I think you're probably right, though." Basil agreed. "Kel really could survive anything. Remember that time he said he saw a giant fish in the lake and spent the next three days trying to catch it with gummy worms as the bait?"

"All I remember was how much Aubrey made fun of him for it."

Basil laughed. "I think she might have secretly been rooting for him, though. It was hard not to get caught up in his enthusiasm."

"It always is." Sunny agreed.

"I remember H-Hero said he was surprised that Kel even had the patience for fishing."

"I think Kel just wanted to prove that he had been right all along." Sunny guessed.

"I kind of wished he would've stopped trying, actually." Basil admitted.

"Huh? *Why?"*

"I just felt b-bad for the fish."

"The fish?"

"Yeah its just... the hook goes right through their mouth and everything. Even if Kel was just going to toss it back, I was secretly hoping the fish would never bite." The blonde had a guilty smirk on his face.

"Wow. What a betrayal..." Sunny joked.

"Hey!" Basil objected. "Which is more important, the fish's wellbeing or Kel getting to show off in front of Mari and Aubrey?"

*Sunny felt his arms tense up slightly when Basil spoke his sister's name.* For once, however, the other boy didn't even seem to notice that he had let her name slip. That was good, wasn't it? *Could they start to talk about it now?*

"Well, I guess you must have gotten your wish then."

"I guess I did." Basil smirked. "He never did catch anything."

"Why'd he stop trying?" Sunny inquired.

"I think he ended up breaking the fishing pole."

Sunny glanced over at his friend and saw that Basil had a soft smile on his face. The flower boy must have noticed that he had turned his head again because he also (perhaps subconsciously) moved to look at Sunny in return.

*For a single second, they stare at one another, eyes locked. Basil's smile vanishes almost instantly.*

*The blonde looked away. That tiny smile had lingered on for a little too long. Sunny swallowed and looked back at the ceiling.*

*Neither resume speaking this time. Sunny feels a billion words all flood into his mind at once, but every one of them fails to exit his mouth.*

He felt something tremble slightly from the other side of the bed. Sunny pretended not to know that it was Basil. If his friend spoke again, Sunny knew the conversation was going to take a turn into something substantially more serious.

*"Why, Sunny?"* Basil whispered, his voice desperate.

*"W-Why couldn't you just keep your promise?"*

Sunny felt like he had been buried alive.

"It would have still been really hard... but we would've at least had each other, right?" The blonde trembled.

Sunny couldn't respond to that. He didn't want to.

"I know it isn't fair... I know it isn't f-fair for me to say that, but-"

*"It's fair."* Sunny insisted.

"No it isn't."

"Yes it is-"

"*It's not.* There isn't anything fair about that at all."

"I promised and I broke that promise." Sunny pointed it out.

"Yeah... you did. But that was... *It's not like I didn't deserve it."*

"Basil-"

"I actually don't want to talk about this." Basil hurriedly cut him off, already sounding out of breath.

"Then why'd you ask about it?" Sunny inquired, trying not to sound accusatory.

"*Because I don't...* know. I don't know." Basil gave up.

"Isn't it... weird that we *haven't* talked about any of it?" Sunny asked.

"Maybe." Basil admitted.

"But do you really want to get into this right now?" He inquired. "While we're... *here?"*

"...no." Sunny admitted.

"Me neither."

"But..." The boy started. "Can you at least tell me that we **will** talk about it?"

*"I don't want to promise you anything."* Basil muttered.

...

*"S-Sorry. That was mean."* Basil apologized.

"That's okay. I deserved it."

"No you didn't."

Sunny let out a sad smirk at the circle they were trapped in.

*The wind outside continued howling its aching song. Sunny had to ask. He had to say it.*

"Do you really think I *hate* you, Basil?"

"No. *I'm sorry.* I know you don't." The blonde spoke as if thinking to himself. "Y-You're actually always looking out for me, aren't you?"

...

*Sunny felt a little confused. That didn't really seem right.*

Basil spoke again, but Sunny wasn't sure if he was talking to him or to himself.

"Which is why you do stuff ***like that****."*

...

"That's not-"

*"I t-think we really should get b-back to sleep now, actually."* Basil suddenly sounded extremely agitated. He had pushed himself too far.

"Basil."

"No." Sunny's friend rejected him. He was **not** going to talk about this again.

Sunny reached towards Basil's arm instinctively, but Basil immediately turned away from him, lying on his side and facing towards the door.

"You don't have to... feel the same way." Sunny stated, trying to keep himself composed. "But c-can't you at least just let me exp-"

"**No**."

"Why won't-"

*"If you don't stop I'm g-going to leave. I'm serious."* The boy cut him off again. Basil sounded like he was about to cry.

...

*Sunny wanted to scream. Both at Basil and at himself. This was torture. Just kill him. Just fucking kill him already.*

***Just say it. Just say you want nothing to do with me.*** Sunny festered inside his own head.

"I... still want to plant that bush."

"Go to sleep, Sunny."

*Sunny was so tired of sleeping.*

# A Girl Comes Home

A girl in her mid-teens waves goodbye to one of her old softball friends as she steps out of the back seat of a rather beat-up convertible. The two of them had attended a birthday party together, and the other girl's mother had been kind enough to drop her off back at her own house so it wouldn't be necessary to walk home in the dark. Having relocated this young lady to her typical place of residence, the car begins to slowly pull away.

The girl gives tender farewells repeatedly to her old friend before their vehicle finally disappears around the street corner, an outstretched hand waving silent goodbyes even from far in the distance. The girl smiles. It was always nice to be able to spend a little time with old friends, even if they were no longer able to share the same hobbies. She scratches at the pale scar that sat atop her knee. A mosquito must have bitten her at some point earlier in the day. The insect had gotten her right on her figurative Achille's heel. A dirty move indeed, even by the low standards of such a loathsome bug.

The girl concludes examining the fresh bump on her leg and finally turns away from the street, slowly making her way back up to the front door of her family's house. The sun has almost completely disappeared beyond the horizon now, and the sky had begun to sink into a deep purple hue. It's the perfect temperature outside. There's a cool breeze creeping gently across her skin, and the air that flows into her lungs feels crisp and clear. It had been a very good day. She considers lingering outside for just a moment longer, even if it is starting to get rather dark.

Her mother and father will not be home yet, she knows this for certain as they had informed her of such. Today was her parent's 15th anniversary, and they had gone out for a fancy dinner somewhere outside of town. That being said, the lights in the house were still on as there was bound to still be at least one occupant left inside.

This girl's younger brother had been left alone in the house by himself. Her brother hates being alone, (and everyone who lived in this home knew that quite well) but he was almost in his teens now, and their parents had decided he needed to stop clinging to others so much and learn to spend more time in his own company. On most days, they would still likely not have left him completely isolated for so long, but they knew his sister would arrive home soon after they left. In their minds, it must have been a good opportunity to get him used to the idea of spending more time by himself.

Once his sister went off to college, these events would likely be much more common, and so he had to adjust to them sooner or later.

*Still, she felt a bit bad for him.*

This girl often worries for her little brother. He is polite and intelligent, but sometimes seemed to struggle socially. He had never been one who excelled at conversing with others, and his harmless-but-prolonged silent stares often had the unfortunate effect of disturbing

other children, older and younger alike. On occasion, even their parent's friends found his persistent gaze somewhat discomforting.

She had tried multiple times to teach him that it was rude to stare, but after he would usually pivot too far in the other direction and fail to meet anyone's eyes entirely. His interpretations of her advice were seemingly a bit too literal. For a while, she had wondered if this was just the kind of life he was going to lead from thereon.

However, She had been lucky enough to have formed a bond with a group of friends that saw those somewhat-strange parts of him as simply quirks of his personality which he would not be judged for too harshly, if at all. In fact, their friends often came to appreciate those qualities about him which had sometimes unnerved others.

This girl's bond with her friends is strong, and she was undeniably proud of the seemingly-unbreakable dynamic they now shared.

Having reached their front door, the girl takes out the spare key she had been lent and invites herself inside. She calls out her brother's name to inform him of her arrival, and then sets out to locate the boy to see if he had already eaten dinner in her absence.

The girl had been expecting to promptly find her brother reading or playing video games by himself in the living room, but that was not the case. The family couch remained empty, the television untouched.

She ascended the stairway to their shared bedroom and knocked before entering, but was surprised once more to find that the room was empty, and the lights were off. The missing boy was not hiding here either. This is quite odd. Her brother was often a creature of habit, so the fact he was not present in either of his most common resting grounds almost came across as reason for alarm.

The girl begins to feel rather nervous. She sets her bag down and her hands begin to shake lightly. She quickly backs herself out of the room and starts walking back down the stairs again after briefly checking to see if her sibling had merely been occupying their bathroom.

This sudden fear she is experiencing is entirely irrational, and she knows that quite well. Her brother had likely just fallen asleep in an odd location somewhere around the house, as he was occasionally one to do. He always somehow seemed a bit tired no matter how much he rested… but maybe the boy just slept out of boredom.

For his birthday, her sibling had been gifted a set of building blocks, but he had (for whatever reason) become transfixed on the box the toy arrived with instead. His sister had found him napping inside that container on multiple occasions, often accompanied by their cat. Both the boy and the feline were black-haired beasts with a lot of growing to do, and that likely only added to their shared tendency to revel in sweet slumber.

Their father had wanted to finally throw that improvised-bed out, but their mother found her brother's antics too cute to discard of the box just yet.

The girl is initially surprised by the prospect that her brother had fallen asleep in the box while the rest of the family was absent, (given that being alone usually unsettled him) but perhaps he had not slept too well the night prior, and his desire to nap had simply overpowered his fear of being in an empty house. Maybe the reason he liked the box so much in the first place was because it made him feel safe.

The mischievous sister snuck up towards the box while standing on her toes, a smug smirk spreading across her lips as she prepared to sneak a glance at the innocent boy slumbering within, perfectly poised to awaken him to the fact of her arrival. Her brother would undoubtedly be happy to see her after having been left alone, although he might try to play it off a bit…

She had been rather loud when entering their home, but he was sometimes surprisingly difficult to awaken, so she had little doubt that he was still asleep in there.

Or perhaps he really had awoken and was simply playing a little prank? A game of hide-and-seek, perhaps? *Hehe…*

*She pulls apart the flaps of the box and reveals-*

Nothing. An empty cardboard floor lies lifelessly at the bottom.

*That doesn't make sense. The girl begins to panic.*

Although this young woman would likely never admit it to anyone, she doesn't like being alone either. *At all.* Given how long she had shared a room with her brother, she was also far from being well-adjusted to the experience. The fear arising from a growing sense of isolation was only underlined by the obvious question:

*Where had the boy gone?*

She violently whips her head around the living room, looking for leftover evidence of his whereabouts, but that worried search dies out almost as quickly as it begins.

As she swings her center of vision across the room she takes note that (in the periphery of her gaze) a rather out-of-place object was sitting by the side of the building on the opposite end of their backyard sliding door.

*There he was. The missing child, resting with his back against the house as he stared out into the trees that grew in the distance of their now-darkening backyard, the branches illuminated only by the last lingering rays of sunlight that yet remained after the enormous ball of fire itself had disappeared beyond the horizon.*

The girl freezes for a moment. There's something distinctly striking about seeing her little brother in this position. The look he wore on his face as he gazed into the distance forced her

mind to take pause. This girl did not know it then, but she would only ever see him wearing such an expression twice in her entire life.

One of her friends was always trying to explain it to her- *the reason he only liked to take pictures of people when they weren't looking.* In this moment, she feels as if she finally understands that stubborn obsession which had plagued him. Before now, it had never entirely made sense to her. Her photographer friend was of the rather shy and anxious variety, so the fact he was so adamant about taking pictures of people *before* gaining their express approval had always struck her as a bit odd. But it seemed as if he had been right all along.

There was just something about... *seeing someone who didn't know they were being seen.*

The expression on her brother's face was solemn and tired, as if staring into the quiet beauty of a peaceful night sky was an attempt to recuperate himself- to soften the blow from whatever it was that had made him look like that. *Something happened.*

The girl's eyes linger on him for a few more shocked seconds before she quietly moves towards the sliding door and gently pulls it back. The boy jumps, having seemingly been so involved in his own mind that he had not noticed her arrival in the slightest. His head violently turns with an expression of fear having cemented itself into his features, but that panicked glance lasts for but a moment. His face immediately readjusts to its typical, neutral status after his reptilian brain recognizes the person who was joining him outside. He turns back to gaze upon the trees. She takes a seat beside him as she speaks.

“Hey! What are you doing out here by yourself? Enjoying the sunset?”

The young man did not respond, or even look at his sister. He just frowned and dejectedly shook his head. The two took a moment to listen to the wind brush through the leaves in silence.

...

*"Bad day?"* She inquired.

Her brother nodded.

"What happened?"

...

“I had a fight.”

“A fight? Fight with who? With Dad?”

“No…”

...

“Who did you fight with, Sunny?” The girl asked again, her voice softer this time.

...

“Basil.”

*Basil?*

The girl felt as if she could not have heard that right. Her brother was simply not the type of person to fight with anyone, but imagining him fighting with Basil just seemed ridiculous above all else. Her mind flooded with a sudden surge of possible justifications, but none of them sounded even mildly convincing. That just didn’t make sense.

“*You fought with Basil?* Why?”

The boy didn’t respond. He continued staring into the distance and scratched lightly at the side of his face, as if he remained unsure whether or not he actually wanted to talk about it.

The girl frowns. Her brother might not have been the most talkative but he was usually open to sharing things with his sister if she put in a little effort first. The fact that he seemed so closed off at the moment led her to believe that the argument he had with Basil must have been something particularly bad.

***Uh oh.*** A twisted knot began to form in the girl's stomach.

“Was your fight about… *Aubrey?”* She asked, biting her finger in anxious anticipation of the very-serious, *very*-difficult conversation that was about to unfold.

She had been worried that something like this would happen for a while, but she assumed it would have taken a lot longer to finally play out, given how passive Basil was about his own feelings.

*He always sidelined himself for the convenience of his other friends*. She had tried to insist to the gardener that continuing to bottle up his feelings was a bad idea, but there was no way she could simply force him to let everything out considering how delicate those particular feelings actually were. Jealousy was an ugly thing.

Besides... Basil didn't exactly share those feelings with her, either. She just managed to piece it together from his defeated behavior and increasingly-strained smiles. It wasn't really her place to be concerned about this on his behalf...

But it also wasn't as if Basil's friends wouldn't be able to work through something like that if he would just open up about it.

Besides, she had serious doubts that her brother thought about Aubrey in the way Basil must have been imagining. The girl continued getting lost in thoughts of her own.

A moment passed in silent contemplation before the girl noticed the boy's expression change. Her little brother acquired a puzzled look on his face.

"*No?* Wait... why would you think it was about *Aubrey?*

*Oops.*

"*Well-* why would you be fighting with Basil at all?" She deflects in order to save herself. *Sorry Basil.*

To the girl's relief, her brother returns to his silent contemplation, seemingly having little interest in whatever it was that his sister had just awkwardly and unwittingly suggested to him.

"...we accidentally broke Mom's jade plate that she got from grandma."

"Oh no! The one in the bookcase? It was so pretty..." The girl lamented. "How did it happen?" Her brother looked downcast.

"Were you guys... messing around in the house?" She asked, a tone of confusion audible in her voice. This girl was attempting to imagine her brother and Basil roughhousing and was having a difficult time of it. "Or did **Kel** also come over today?"

The boy smirked at the more definitive quality her tone acquired by the second question, but he shook his head to deny a third individual's involvement in his conflict.

A casual viewer might have found it odd how many questions the girl had to ask to get even a modicum of a response from her sibling, but this kind of dialogue was not unusual between the two of them. Her brother often struggled to find the words he needed to express what he wanted to say, so a sudden game of twenty-questions was not an uncommon occurrence. It was all about providing him the necessary prompting. He had actually been improving at speaking on his own as he grew older, but the more emotional the topic of discussion, the more difficult he found it to express himself.

*It was like a game. She was a detective, trying to find the necessary clues to help him say what he otherwise struggled to.*

"So... Basil got mad at you for... *breaking mom's plate?"* The girl asked, the confusion and disbelief once more underpinning her own question. Her brows bent in response to her brain's nonsensical imaginings.

*"No..."* The boy denied.

"Basil said we needed to lie about it." Her brother admitted. *"and he got mad at me when I didn't."*

"Lie? He wanted you to say you didn't break it?" She thought aloud. The boy nodded.

"I didn't, though. I told dad when he got home."

"Well... I'm glad you didn't lie." The girl stated, trying to fill out their conversation while she attempted (and failed) to picture Basil asking his friend to lie about *anything.*

She would have likely wondered if her brother was actually the one lying right now, but the look on his face confirmed to her that he wasn't.

"Was dad upset about it?"

"No. He barely cared at all." The boy stated. "Mom might be a little mad, but..."

"...I just don't understand why he thought we had to lie." He finished. "B-Basil was freaking out about it." The girl pinched her chin.

The boy's sister began to finally form a somewhat-coherent explanation of the conflict in her head. It wasn't guaranteed to clarify their friend's behavior, but she was fairly confident that her guess was a step in the right direction.

*Even if she wished it wasn't.*

"Hey, Sunny?" She prompted.

The boy turns to look at her.

"You know how Aubrey's mom can be a bit... *strange?*"

Her brother's brows furrowed. "I don't like her." He admitted. "She's scary."

"*Yeah*. She kind of is." His sister agreed.

"Well, sometimes... I don't think Aubrey's mom is as nice to her as ours is to us." She stated. "Do you kind of get what I mean?"

The boy nods.

"...and I think that the fact that she gets treated that way might explain a little bit about why Aubrey is the way she is. Both the things that make her such a great person, **and** the things that make her... *troubled,* sometimes." The girl elaborates. "Does that make sense to you?"

The boy nods again. His sister lets out a quiet exhale before continuing.

"*Soooo*... I think that maybe *Basil's* parents are the kinds of people who would not be very happy at all if you broke *their* plate. Maybe that's why he felt like it was something the two of you needed to hide." The girl explains. "Maybe that's why he finds it a lot harder to trust adults than you or me."

Her brother looked towards the ground in silent contemplation. He nodded once again, but more slowly this time.

"Something like that could make it more difficult to trust people in general." She claims. "But I know Basil trusts you, doesn't he? So you'll look out for him for us, won't you Sunny?"

"I know he can act like he doesn't need your help because he's a little older, but... *and don't tell anyone else I said this, okay?* " The girl suddenly whispers.

"I think sometimes he's just trying to impress you, really. Basil is so cute like that, isn't he? *Hehe~"*

The boy's ears turn red. Listening to his sister talk about their friend this way was embarrassing, it seemed.

"Do you want me to see if I can talk to Basil for you before our picnic tomorrow?" She gently inquired if he wanted her involvement to help smooth things over.

*The boy frowned and shook his head.*

"Alright, I'll leave it up to you, then." She stated, a tentative smile attempting to sprout from her lips. "I doubt Basil would ever stay upset at you anyway, especially over something like that. It's just not like him."

"I'm sure that you two will work it out soon." She reassured him. "And if you don't then I'll force you!" The girl suddenly put on a tone of mock seriousness and an expression of fake disapproval.

A moment passes in relative silence as the girl yawns to herself.

“Did you already eat dinner? Are you starting to get hungry yet?”

The boy shook his head again. “Not really.”

“It’s still pretty nice outside right now…” The girl exhaled and closed her eyes for a moment.

“Yeah.”

...

“By the way, don’t forget your tutor might have rescheduled but you’ll still have practice tomorrow morning.”

*“Yeah.”*

“And you gotta eat if you want to work that bow, y’know?” She poked him in the ribs, trying to elicit a laugh or a smile from him but failing. Her younger brother mostly just looked annoyed now.

“*Well, anyway.* I’m going to go heat up some of the leftover spaghetti, let me know if you decide you want any.”

“Thank you.”

---

...

"Mari."

"Yes?" The girl replies, pausing in the doorway while she waited for her little brother to speak again.

"How much longer am I going to have to-"

"Oh, shoot! Did you feed Mewo yet? I forgot to do it before I left..."

The boy's sister disappears back into the house after intentionally ignoring him.

*Sunny sighs to himself. His sibling already knew what he wanted to ask, but she was simply not interested in bothering to even let the question enter her ears. He was going to be playing that violin for a long time to come, and it was seemingly in his best interest to just get over it.*

# On the Road

"Well... did anyone find anything?" Aubrey asked the two brothers as the three of them stood in the sand, each having returned to the same location where they had begun their search.

"Nope!" Kel declared.

"I asked a few dozen people, but they didn't really give anything to go off of." Hero admitted.

"So... *that's it, then?* Next location?" Aubrey inquired. "Only a few more places left to check, yeah?"

Hero grit his teeth. This was already looking hopeless and they had only just started. Their trip was setting itself up to be both short *and* unproductive. *But of course it was.* Sunny and Basil could be anywhere in the world right now. Thinking that they would just happen to end up somewhere which had stuck inside Hero's head was nothing short of deranged self-conceit. Hero's friends must have already thought he was being ridiculous dragging them out here in the first place.

Maybe he really was losing his mind... but this was something he had to do no matter what. Even if they hadn't come with him, Hero would have still been out here alone.

*Maybe that would have been a better idea.* Hero exhaled.

Aubrey must have picked up on the mild change in Hero's demeanor, because her eyebrows had furrowed slightly. Hero did his best to shake off the persistent gnawing inside his head. "Why don't the three of us get some lunch?" He suggested.

"Heck yeah! I'm starving." Kel exclaimed. "What do you guys feel like eating?"

---

Hero and his brother stood in line inside of a local fast-food joint. Upon seeing the line of cars waiting outside, they figured it might actually be faster if they just went into the building, but the lobby was fairly crowded as well. Aubrey was waiting in the car by herself, most likely having already stolen the front passenger seat from Kel in his absence.

Kel ran Hero through the weird call he had on his brother's phone earlier and what he hadn't told him in regards to Aubrey while they waited in line. The description he provided didn't strike Hero as being immediate reason for alarm, but what Kel said was still somewhat discomforting news considering that Aubrey had only *just* gotten out of the hospital.

"So, do **you** think Aubrey might be in danger of doing something like that again? Hurting herself?" Hero asked for his brother's own opinion on the matter.

"I mean, not really." Kel denied. "Would she really do that while on a trip with us? Kim probably just couldn't find her blades because she already got rid of them or put them somewhere else." Kel scratched his nose. "But I don't really get that stuff anyway."

*"Maybe this is something we should just ask her about directly..."* Hero pondered aloud.

"I dunno, I doubt she'd be into that. I'll leave it up to you, bro." Kel stated. "Kim was technically calling for you after all, not me."

Hero felt his eyebrow twitch slightly in response to Kel casually passing the ball over to him like that, but it was probably for the best. Hero didn't exactly trust his brother to be delicate about these kinds of things. Kel suddenly sneezed into his elbow.

"Bless you."

"Thanks!"

The crowd continued moving forward.

"And how are **you** doing?" Kel asked his brother a very open-ended question.

"*How am I doing?* Uhh, fine?" Hero responded, confused.

*A rare moment of silence from Kel passed by to emphasize what his brother was actually asking about.*

...

*"Are you sure?"* Kel prodded him again.

Hero exhaled. "*Yeah.* Yeah, I'm fine."

"Alright."

Hero felt the need to take a quick bathroom break so he asked if Kel would keep their place in line while he was absent. His brother agreed to those terms and Hero went to splash some water on his face. Much to his surprise, the restroom was entirely empty.

It was quiet in here. Somehow, despite the rather loud crowd of people outside, the interior of this room was bizarrely devoid of sound. It almost felt like he was in an entirely different building.

Hero stared at his double in the bathroom mirror for a moment. He wasn't usually one who took much time to look at his reflection (unless he needed to fix his hair) but for whatever reason he finds himself temporarily transfixed by his own face. He's wearing a subtle expression that he doesn't quite understand. There's an emotion hiding in there... *somewhere*. Hero scratched lightly at the side of his left eye.

Kel asked how he was doing, and Hero said that he was fine. That *was* true, wasn't it? He **felt** fine... didn't he?

...

*Well, whatever. He should get back in line. No time for this.*

Upon his return, Kel had already made their purchase and temporarily sat down by a corner table while the food was being made. Hopefully Kel had actually gotten their order right.

Hero noted that his brother looked rather tired at the moment, which was a rare look for him. Usually he would appear perfectly energetic right up until the moment that he crashed and fell asleep instantly. Hero would be talking to him one moment, and he would be asleep the next. That's how the process usually went.

The pair spent a few minutes waiting for their food while Kel assaulted the free refills. Hero watched with an upset stomach as Kel chugged inordinate amounts of corn-syrup laden and highly-caffeinated beverages with a satisfied grin on his face. Once they were back on the road, Kel was going to be begging to use the restroom. Hero sighed.

The pair received their sandwiches and returned to the vehicle. Aubrey had indeed liberated the shotgun position from Kel's behind, but Hero's brother was too busy stuffing his face to care. He went ahead and acquired Aubrey's previous seat in the back. Hero took a moment to feed himself before they got back on the road, but noticed that Aubrey was not doing the same. When Hero inquired about that, Aubrey said she wasn't particularly hungry at the moment and would save her sandwich for later. Hero's friend tucked the takeout bag on the floor by her feet and carried on sipping her drink instead.

*Having finished his own meal, Hero got back on the highway.*

---

No one had spoken in a while. Kel had seemingly started to drift off behind him, and Hero figured there was only a few more moments left until the boy in the back seat started obnoxiously snoring and Aubrey would resort to sticking something in his mouth to shut him up. The imaginary clock in Hero's head steadily ticked down towards his brother's unfortunate demise.

The radio was on, but the volume was as so low that you could barely make it out. The song playing was a relatively upbeat pop tune, but with the very low volume and the sound of the wind outside, it came across as a bit sad for some reason. Or at least that's how Hero felt.

He focused on passing the vehicle in front of him while he listened to Aubrey as she began to dig around in her takeout bag, seemingly having regained her appetite by this point. Hero was surprised to find how subtle her movements were. Those crinkly bags were always extremely loud, but Aubrey was moving slowly and delicately, almost as if she was intentionally trying to avoid waking up the boy in the backseat. Whether that was because she genuinely didn't want to disturb his peaceful slumber or because she simply wanted to enjoy her own food in relative silence was not entirely clear.

Hero glanced in her direction after the crinkling sounds had suddenly ceased. Aubrey had paused for a moment upon revealing the meal that had been stored away for later. *Kel had gotten her order wrong. Figures.*

To Hero's repeated surprise, Aubrey didn't sigh, or complain, or call his brother out for refusing to listen. She just continued unwrapping the sandwich as she stared out the window. The world outside rolled by under the gentle warmth of a clouded summer sun. You wouldn't think that there was a pair of wounded teenagers missing from their hospital beds on a day like this, because it just didn't fit the atmosphere... and yet that was the truth. *Even so, the world carried on regardless.*

Hero felt the sudden need to ask Aubrey something, but he wasn't sure what... *and he knew he wouldn't.* He didn't want to interrupt her while she was eating, and whatever he wanted to say it probably wouldn't be something that Hero could ask her while Kel was sitting right behind him in the backseat. It would likely have to wait.

In this moment, Hero feels particularly guilty. Out of everyone, Hero was definitely the one who should have been there for Aubrey after Mari had passed. She had changed so much in his absence. It still seemed far from too late to rebuild that bridge given that she had attended this trip at all, but Hero still regretted not trying harder, *sooner.*

*Things didn't have to end up like this.*

Speaking to Aubrey again was a little difficult, even for Hero, but it was not nearly as harrowing as he imagined it could be. He had just been avoiding everyone for his own selfish convenience.

Hero had made plenty of new friends in college. Making friends had always come easily to him, even if he didn't really understand why. However, he never felt as close to the friends he had now as he did those he knew when he was younger. Maybe its just because the four of them were more familiar, or maybe it was because he was more innocent back then... *and being near Aubrey now made him feel that way again, if only a little.*

It wasn't like that with his current friends. To Hero, it felt... *strange* being around people that didn't know anything about her... *but of course they didn't.* Hero figured that it just felt strange because everything about the person he had become was because of Mari.

Both knowing her... *and losing her.*

Even after four long years, that had not changed. Maybe it never would.

Hero hated to admit it, but he sometimes resented his new friends, even if that wasn't fair of him. The people he knew now would laugh and joke and drink and smile genuinely, but Hero could only pretend to join in with them. There was no reason to be smiling, not really. That kind of unrestrained, uninhibited, unconcerned enjoyment was something Hero would never be a part of. He was still surviving, *but not exactly alive.*

Aubrey continued quietly chewing for a while before she finally stopped.

"Your blinker is on." The girl stated.

*"Oops."* Hero turned off his turn signal, which he had left on and then left unnoticed.

A moment of silence passes.

"So how is college going?" Aubrey inquired.

"Its going well! I like it, but it can also be pretty difficult sometimes." Hero replies.

"Don't push yourself too hard, Hero." Aubrey insisted.

He smiled. "I won't, I promise."

"How are you liking all the medical business? Is it interesting?" She asked.

"Yeah, it's not so bad." Hero stated. "Kind of gross though, at times."

Aubrey smirked. *"How are you doing with all the blood and guts, huh?"*

The nervous student felt a bead of sweat trying to form on his forehead. "I'm getting better!" Hero reassured her (and himself).

"The three of us could rent some horror movies while you're in town if you need some help getting desensitized." Aubrey suggested, seemingly half-joking.

*"That might work, haha..."* Hero lied and faked a laugh.

Spending some more time with Aubrey didn't sound so bad, though. It had been a long while since they had each spoken, after all... and Aubrey seemed to have changed a lot in Hero's absence. *She'd grown up. Become the kind of person she might be for the rest of her life.*

"Make any new friends at your campus?" Aubrey asked.

"Yeah, a few. I have trouble fitting in with the college party lifestyle, though."

"I bet. Gotta loosen you up, Hero." She smirked.

Another moment passed in silence.

"So are any of your new friends... *girls?"* She asked.

*Hero knew it was coming.*

"Yes, some of them are. I'm not currently seeing anyone, though." He confirmed.

...

*"Sorry, I was just curious."* Aubrey apologized.

Hero let out a sad smile. "Nothing wrong with asking."

"How about you? You're definitely of that age. How is Aubrey's dating life going?" Hero asked with an obnoxious wink.

"*As if.* All the boys in our town are so immature..."

Hero laughed. He couldn't really argue much with that. There wasn't exactly a lot of options in Faraway.

But surely they couldn't **all** be bad? *Besides, there were more than just boys in town, Hero thought to himself. Aubrey seemed a tad bit flustered by his question though, so he didn't ask anything more.*

"So what are your plans for after high school? *Fun question, I know."* Hero joked.

"Well, I don't exactly have the funding to go to college right now, so I'll probably move out and start working. Me and Kim have been talking about applying to the same places so we know someone else wherever we end up."

"Not that I don't already know basically everyone in Faraway... and the ones I don't probably know *me.*" Aubrey joked.

Hero thought he heard almost a hint of annoyance in Aubrey's voice at the end. College was something Hero likely tended to take for granted, but that opportunity was definitely not something as easily grasped by someone from a single-parent household like Aubrey. *Especially given the way her mother was.*

Hero felt himself dig his nails into the steering wheel. Aubrey probably wasn't joking about knowing everyone in Faraway. Out of everyone in their group, Aubrey had become the one who spent the least of her time at home, which nobody was going to question. Aubrey had it rough.

At the very least, she seemed to have made herself a sizable circle of new friends in the absence of her childhood companions. A fresh family away from her own, it seemed. Hero loved his parents, but he would be lying if he claimed he didn't miss the days when he had something like that, too.

*A butterfly drifted in the path of Polly's car while in mid-flight. At the speed he was going, the poor insect stood zero chance. Hero flinched.*

"Oops. Sorry butterfly."

"RIP." Aubrey agreed.

Another moment of silence passes in remembrance of the fallen bug. Hero tried not to think about a friend he used to have that would often tell him facts about the butterflies drifting through the air as he gardened.

...

"How is your arm doing?" Hero inquired.

Aubrey scratched at the bandage wrapping around her skin. "It doesn't really hurt anymore. It just itches sometimes."

"That's good."

"Yep."

...

"Sorry." Hero apologized. "I feel like I'm struggling to come up with anything to talk about right now, haha..."

Aubrey smirked again. "Don't worry about it."

"You know who *hasn't* been having any trouble talking?" Aubrey joked, suddenly turning to leer at the unconscious teen dreaming in the back seat. "I swear he just never shuts up."

"It's like he doesn't even know **how** to say nothing." She complained.

"Yeah, but that has its own charms, doesn't it?" Hero winked.

"If you say so."

"Even after everything that's happened, he barely even seems phased by it. It's exactly the same as back then. I just don't understand how he does that." Aubrey pondered aloud. Hero couldn't tell if her voice sounded impressed or annoyed. He chuckled.

*"But he does care."* Hero stated with certainty. "I might be the older brother, but even I still have Kel watching out for me sometimes." The driver stated with a cheesy grin.

"How embarrassing for you..." Aubrey smiled.

"Should we wake him up so he can hear us talking about him?"

"And be able to defend himself? No thanks." She stated.

*The older brother smiles again, and Aubrey finishes eating. Hero stares at the rolling hills of asphalt in front of his eyes and feels himself slowly drifting back into old, painful memories that he had been hiding for a very long time.*

# Because he Wanted to

Basil had, when he was younger, always tried to be a trusting person. He hoped that was the way other people saw him.

In spite of his consistent lack of friends, he always tried to see the best in others, even if he often had a bit of trouble understanding them. Understanding them and being understood.

Maybe he tried to take people at their word because he wanted to believe in them? Maybe he wanted to believe in them because he thought they would like him if he did. But if he didn't act like that, then they wouldn't like him at all, would they?

So Basil didn't trust anyone, not really. Not until he met Aubrey. Aubrey and them. Them and *Sunny.*

He could still remember his repeated embarrassments, even after all these years. Those first few moments in which he made a complete fool of himself in front of all of them, right after they had only just started to accept him into their group. He departed from his new friends that day feeling absolutely sure that he would never see any of them again... and yet, the invitations persisted. The smiles and laughs persisted.

Did they really not mind him? Did they really not mind they way he was? Could that be true?

*No.* Their group had always and would always be too good for him. Eventually, they would reveal that they secretly thought he was irritating and stupid. He just had to wait long enough, and it would happen.

*But it didn't.* No matter how long he waited, that day never came. Their eventual rejection seemed less and less likely with each passing week.

Slowly... Basil almost started to forget he had been anticipating it in the first place. He had been wrong in his wary assumptions. They were never laughing at him, they were laughing *with* him. They didn't tolerate his presence, they *enjoyed* it. His friends weren't pretending to be so unreasonably kind and forgiving, that's just how they actually were.

*Haha. They were all actually quite strange, weren't they? Haha...*

That little flower of battered trust slowly started to grow back again. Basil found himself saying things to them that he had never said before. Things he never thought he would say. Things he wondered if he would ever be able to tell to anyone else.

*Especially with Sunny. All of them were quite kind, but around Sunny...*

Being himself just felt **easy**. *Fun,* even. Basil had never felt that way before.

Basil would never forget the moment that it happened. That first moment in which Kel and Aubrey had started arguing amongst themselves and Sunny leaned in towards his friend. He

leaned close to Basil's side and whispered a subtle joke into his ear. It was a simple comedic observation, casually shared with Basil but *no one else.* The blonde could still remember the goosebumps on his arms, and the aching inside his chest.

*Was it really okay? Was it okay to have so much fun with everyone? To feel this way? Had life always been this much fun and Basil was just too anxious to notice? What a shame...*

*Trust. Basil trusted*. Basil could trust Sunny, and he would do whatever he could to make sure Sunny knew the same was true about him. He and Sunny would be best friends for the rest of their lives, and they would share everything with each other.

His friends would never have to know what Basil was actually like, because he wasn't going to stay that way. He could feel himself changing. Becoming a better person because of them. Slowly and steadily turning into someone who was worthy of having friends like those.

It was a beautiful fluke. A form of insane luck that most people would likely never experience. Basil had practically won the lottery. He didn't earn them, or deserve them, but he had them.

***But of course, Basil fixed all that himself, didn't he?***

After what happened that day, Basil didn't trust anyone anymore. Whenever other people spoke to him, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was suddenly locked in an interrogation room. No matter how much time passed, he always felt as if the next person who spoke to him was finally going to be the one. The person who would say that *they knew.* The person who would say that they knew what he did to her, and that they were going to tell **everyone**.

Basil truly hated that change in himself, because of how unbelievably hypocritical it was. **Basil** was the one who had done something unforgivable. **Basil** was the one who lied to everyone about everything. **Basil** was the one who didn't deserve to be trusted, and yet he was the one who grew to be distrustful of every single person in his life. He was an infection that spread even to himself.

It was an insane delusion that haunted him. Years after the cover-up had obviously been accepted by their community and their friends one might think that those looming shadows of ceaseless guilt or shocking stints of obsessive paranoia would have diminished even slightly, but the opposite was true. The older Basil got, the more terrified he became. He largely lost the ability to look other people in the face, and felt as if that anxious tendency would only make it even more obvious to his eventual, theoretical punisher that he was in fact the rightfully accused.

*It was only a matter of time until someone finally found them out. He could feel it.*

If they were finally found out, then it really would all have been for nothing. Not only would people unfairly despise Sunny for what happened, Basil would have failed to change anything about that outcome at all, he would have only delayed it. If people found out, then that would mean Sunny would not only still get punished in the end, but that Basil's actions had ruined his life for no reason. That Sunny had seen her hanging like that for nothing.

*And yet, in spite of his constant fear of the truth catching up with him, in spite of how much shame it made him feel, part of Basil wanted it.*

Basil wanted people to know, if only so they would stop being kind to him. Stop treating him the way they did. He wanted to yell in their faces about the kind of person he actually was, and for them to despise him. He wants that horrible event to **finally** come to pass, if only so it stops tormenting his perpetually-exhausted mind. One tiny part of Basil wanted that escape so badly he could scream... *and all the other parts hated him for it.*

Which was why, when that fateful day finally came upon him, Basil couldn't help but smile in overwhelming, aching relief. It was the most beautiful day of his life. Something more perfect than he could ever hope to deserve. The vines that grew to suffocate him had finally come loose. He was given a moment of freedom for the first time in longer than he could remember.

The person who he imagined would finally expose them both... had ended up being Sunny the entire time.

Sunny, the boy who owed him nothing, still showed up to save him even after all the sadness and hurt and anger that Basil had stabbed into his head.

The boy he loved more than anything, who finally left that accursed house looking as if he had been hollowed from the inside out into nothing more than an empty shell, was *smiling* at *him*. At **Basil**. Basil of all people.

Sunny tried to talk to him a bit that day, but the blonde could scarcely respond. From him, it was all mostly sobbing. Everything he wanted to say was drowned in the endless sea of apologies. Apologies that were ceaselessly given... *and ceaselessly returned.*

After all those years, Sunny revealed that he was not a liar. Basil could have probably kept hiding it forever, but Sunny wasn't like that. It wasn't in his nature to do such a thing. Sunny couldn't run from it any longer than he already had. Basil's friend would shove them all into the truth, even if the others despised him for it.

It was that refusal to continue lying that had freed them both, as well as the only reason they were still speaking to each other now.

*So... was it really fair of Basil to act so sure that Sunny was lying again?*

The blonde felt as though every breath he took got stuck in his throat. Basil and his friend had stopped talking a few hours ago, but every word the other boy said was still buzzing around in his head, holding his conscious mind hostage no matter how much he longed to sleep, or how desperately that sleep was needed.

*Why did Sunny still remember all that old stuff they talked about? A lot of that stuff was so stupid and unimportant... how could he act as if all of it was so obvious to him? That was all years ago now, wasn't it?*

And why did Sunny have to keep trying to bring everything up again! This was already so difficult as it was. Didn't he see how hard Basil was trying right now? *J-Just give him a break...*

*It was his own fault. Basil and his big mouth. Always trying to keep Sunny entertained with pointless nonsense. He could have just forced Sunny to go to sleep in the first place.*

*But why did he seem so sad?* When Basil had unfairly snapped at him earlier, Sunny seemed to take it quite hard... or rather, he seemed outright *miserable.* Even after all the nightmarish things that were happening to the two of them right now, it was the gardener shutting him out that somehow hit Basil's friend the hardest.

*Why? That didn't make sense. Why was he so upset?* Sunny was the one who had done something creepy and mean while they were stuck here. He shouldn't be able to make a face like that. *Please don't make that face...*

It just doesn't seem right. None of it makes any sense. It's too confusing. It's so confusing that he can't take it... the inside of Basil's skull had transformed into an excruciating hive of noise.

And so, in this fake room, in this strange building, in this cold place, something inside of Basil begins to unwind. Something that Basil would not forgive himself for. Something beautiful and horrible and wonderful and very, **very** frightening.

A tiny piece of Basil starts to believe that Sunny really did mean what he said... *and what he did*.

Obtaining these nagging doubts just makes Basil increasingly angry at himself. He was simply torturing himself for no reason, pitifully attempting to make this unfathomably horrid situation into one of his sick little romantic fantasies. Even with the nightmare scenario they were in right now, Basil still couldn't resist the urge to continue twisting up his own insides by playing a never-ending game of pretend.

But Basil didn't have time for pointless self-punishment. He needed to sleep and put himself back together again so that at least one of them would be fit to walk around. It had been over two full days since they had woken up here and still no one had found them.

The current solution was simply to sleep. Pass the time using rest. Maybe someone would appear to save them later today, but if no one did, they would at least put themselves in a slightly more-functional condition. They had to.

If the absolute worst came to pass, Basil would go out searching for help alone. He'd go looking whether Sunny liked it or not.

But as the minutes march past in the quiet of this abandoned place, Basil's new anxious beliefs and needy hopes start to grow louder and more insistent. They stir themselves up around the circumference of his skull, taunting and leering at him. The little echoes cry out to Basil, complaining to him relentlessly as they swirl and squirm in and out of his head.

*Why could he never just keep sleeping like Sunny?*

**You're both going to die in here. Do you really want to die while you're still acting like this?**

Shut up. We're not going to die.

**Oh really? Then why has no one come to find you? If you're going to die in here-**

I'm not.

**-then what is the point of all this self-restraint? Whose benefit is this for, exactl-**

I'm not restraining anything.

**Sure. *Ahh...* it's still so cold in here. This blanket isn't thick enough. I bet Sunny is warm, though... warm like the sun...**

**He's glancing over here again. Can't you feel him looking? *Hehe... this is so embarrassing...***

**Didn't you see how upset you were making him? How long are you going to keep pushing him away like this? Do you really think that he would just fake all that stuff to keep you around? That he cares about you enough to be able to conjure up false feelings like those?**

Yes.

**Grow up. Sunny isn't some kind of selfless saint who always has your safety in mind. All the things he does aren't part of some grand, cosmic scheme to protect you from ending yourself. The truth is so much more obvious, isn't it? Sunny is in his teens now too, after all...**

Stop.

**He kissed you, *because he wanted to.***

*Those shadowy bits of Basil's brain continued purring their inexcusable lies. The blonde felt his heartbeat increasing rapidly. He needed to stop. He needed to think about anything else. Anything else besides this. The blonde tried to focus on the clock that hung on the wall but somehow the fact that it never ticked made him even more anxious.*

**He's so pulled to you that even after all the selfish, loathsome, *disgusting* things you've done, he *still* can't keep his hands to himself. He must be as touch-starved as you are to stoop himself so low... maybe Sunny just wanted to touch you so badly that nothing else mattered. *Isn't that crazy?***

**Or maybe some part of him likes it like this? Maybe living alone all those years left him messed up too. Maybe the awful things you did are somehow the reason he still likes you at all. That has to be it, right? He has some sort of abhorrent appreciation for it all? Maybe Sunny is almost as creepy as you are.**

**Or Sunny might just be incapable of imagining that he'll ever be liked by anyone other than you. Sunny did something really awful, right? You're probably the only person who knows and doesn't hate him for it. So maybe he was just trying to take what he could get. 'Beggars can't be choosers' is probably the only reason anyone would ever choose *you*, right?**

**That's sad. It's awful that you ruined everything for him. He and Aubrey would have made a really cute couple...**

***Or maybe you're still just making excuses because you're afraid of him.***

*Please save Basil. Don't leave him. Pllease.. pleeas... pleassse...*

Sunny's delusional cries for Basil's safety kept haunting him. Why had Sunny been crying out like that? Why did he sound so pathetic and desperate in that moment?

**Sunny must be a really good actor, huh? I bet he spent those four years taking online classes.**

*Shut the fuck up.*

Get out of here. They needed to get out of here as soon as they could. Basil was going to go completely insane if they had to stay in here any longer. He had been trying to force their conversation to stay on-rails, but it hadn't been working. He couldn't help himself. Every time Sunny spoke to him, it felt as if he was going to grow so anxious he would split in half. If Basil had to squeeze through one more conversation while stuck in this room it would be the end of him.

**This is your fault. You could have just left while you had the chance. This is what you wanted, so don't act so upset about it.**

**Oh Sunny, I'm so sorry about the way I acted before. I'm scared, it's dark and creepy and empty in here. Won't you hold me again, please? I didn't mean those nasty things I said, I'm just so afraid... you'll save me, won't you? You know I can never do anything right when I'm alone...** Basil tortured himself.

**I'm so pitiful and hopeless without you, Sunny. If I couldn't trust you I don't know what I'd do. B-But you really meant it, right? I just c-can't believe you would feel like that about me, hehe. Are you sure you wouldn't rather be doing that stuff with someone else? That wasn't your first kiss, was it? You can't just waste something like that on me..."**

***B-But if you're really so insistent...***

Basil silently raked his nails downwards across his face, attempting to utilize the pain to help him ignore the inane, unwanted gibberish that his mind kept spitting out against his will.

**No? You don't like it? Alright, how about something like...**

**I've sure had to take care of you a lot recently, huh Sunny? Hehe... Is that alright with you, or do you dislike it? Do you think its embarrassing to have me fussing over you like that? You don't have to feel weird about it... you're hurt after all, so you should let me take care of you. It's my fault we're both so messed up right now, so just let me handle it, okay? Please don't worry about all this...**

...

**My stomach hurts. It hurts so much, Sunny. I really did think it was all over, back then. That you had died hating me. I can't tell you how much I wanted it to all end after that. The moment I thought you were gone, the entire world seemed so empty. But I also can't tell you how happy I am to still be here with you now, after everything. Would you even believe that? Would you believe how much I still want to spend time with you even now? After the way I've been acting?**

**Does your eye still hurt? It does, doesn't it? I'm sorry. If I'm being honest, I still don't understand how you could forgive me for taking so, so much from you. I really would do anything to undo it all, if I could. But I'm sure you already know that. You probably feel the same way.**

**Losing your eye to a friend should be an unforgivable thing, I know...**

**But, *and this is just a suggestion...* so don't freak out or anything, okay?**

*Stop.*

**It's just an idea.**

*STOP.*

***Do you really need two eyes?***

*Basil squeezes his own two eyes shut. It will stop in a minute. It always does. He just needs to stay calm until it's over.*

**You've seen enough awful, horrible stuff already haven't you? Enough to fill up an entire lifetime... because of *me.* I'm sorry... but you don't have to deal with any of it any more if you don't want to. I can help you, Sunny. I can fix it all, if you let me.**

It always felt wrong- *just sitting back and listening as his own mind run off like this.* But Basil had spent so long with only those spite-filled ramblings for company that he could barely even attempt to silence them anymore. They would still fall quiet in a moment, though. Basil was sure of it. He just had to wait it out...

Except it's different this time. It's different because Sunny is right there. He's lying right there beside him. Basil isn't alone for once.

Those vile words that torment Basil are agitated by his presence. The fact that Sunny is still next to him right now was driving Basil up the wall. The blonde's thoughts are so loud in this moment that he feels as if there's no way Sunny wouldn't be able to hear them.

**I could take the other one out, too. I know it would hurt a lot, but don't you think it could be better that way?**

*He's sorry. He's so sorry. Please don't listen to it, Sunny. He's not really like that. He would never do that. Please don't listen.*

**I know it sounds hard to live without eyes, but I promise it wouldn't be! I could be your eyes, Sunny! You can c-count on me!**

*Please, stop...*

**I could read your books for you, and make your food for you... wash you clean... hehe...**

**I could learn how to be a professional caretaker from Polly, and then you could hire me as your own personal servant. Then we could spend every minute together, like a sleepover that never ends. Wouldn't that be nice, Sunny? Don't you miss having *real* sleepovers in a *real* bed? Staying up late and telling each other secrets? Reading books and eating cookies?**

**I know it might not sound quite as good since its just the two of us now, but I promise I can still make it feel special. We're older than we used to be, Sunny. Sleepovers can be something really special now, you know? I-If you're okay with it...**

Basil begins to feel increasingly nauseous. This wasn't going to stop, no matter how hard he tried to force it to do so. There's no escaping this nightmare, not even inside his own head.

**I'm sorry. It was just a joke. I could never hurt you like that again... you know that, right? It would kill me. So don't run away again, okay? Please. It was so sad for both of us last time, wasn't it? *Don't leave me again*...**

**I promise I can be useful in my own way! You can still rely on me for anything you want to. If I prove that's true, will you stay with me then? I'm sorry... I'll do anything you want. Anything to fix this.**

***Four years*. For four years I never stopped thinking about you once, Sunny. Isn't that creepy? That's so creepy, isn't it? You can hate me for it if you want to. I know I deserve to be punished. That's probably why we're out here right now, huh? As some kind of punishment? I'm sorry you got dragged into this.**

**Ever since we got here, I've been so unfair to you. Do you want to hurt me, Sunny? You could take one of my eyes too, if you want. We could match. W-Would that make it any better? I just want you to be b-**

"Um, Basil... are you okay?"

*Oh no.*

A nervous, black-haired hermit presents the gardener with a concerned inquiry from the other side of the mattress. Sunny has noticed something is happening with him. Basil had begun quivering slightly, and his breathing was labored. The blonde's silent suffering must have tipped the other boy off. Even though they were lying silently in bed, Basil had somehow begun panicking.

**I'm lonely, Sunny... I've been so lonely for so long...**

**Are you lonely too? I'd do anything to stop feeling that way.**

"Basil, I'm serious. I know you're upset right now but you're starting to shake."

*Basil does not respond.*

**I really missed watching you sleep, Sunny. Is that weird? I just like seeing the way your face relaxes, I guess. You can look pretty serious sometimes, you know? I often worry about what you're thinking when you're awake...**

"Is it your s-stomach? Is there anything I can do?"

*No. No Sunny, please, not right now. Talk to him later. Just don't say anything right now, okay? Please...*

**You know all that stuff you said about hallucinating things that aren't there? You aren't crazy, Sunny. I see weird stuff too... it used to all feel so real, you know? But because we both see stuff like that, it just means the two of us can understand each other better, don't you think? Most people wouldn't get it if you told them that you say things that weren't real, but I know what its like. I understand.**

**Isn't it nice to have a friend who knows everything that you've been through? Nobody else will ever be able to understand you the way that I do, right? You'll always need me, won't you?**

"You can say no, just... say *something.* Please?"

But Basil didn't say anything. He was too terrified to open his mouth. He couldn't say a word to Sunny, it would just make everything worse.

With his arms concealed under the covers, Basil kept pinching himself on his side over and over, viciously digging into his skin to try and center himself back in reality. He would have used the cut on his stomach like before, but Sunny was too close to him now. If Basil accidentally drew blood, his friend would get upset again. Then they would both start freaking out.

**You know all my hopes and dreams, Sunny. I always felt safe sharing everything with you... *almost* everything.**

**I thought if you knew how I thought about you that you wouldn't want to be around me anymore. If it was anyone else, maybe I could have said it eventually.**

**But you were too special to me, and I was so afraid of losing you... it was because I felt like I could share everything else with you that the one thing I wanted to say the most was the one thing I never could. I still can't say it now, even after all that's happened...**

"Do you want to get up for a minute? We've been in bed a long time."

*Shut up!* Why was Sunny even talking to him right now? Why was he always like this? How did Sunny keep falling asleep so easily in the same bed as Basil? It was ridiculous... *what the heck was wrong with him?* How was he always so relaxed around the person who tried to kill him? Didn't Sunny understand what kind of person his friend was by now? Why did none of the awful things he did ever seem to matter to him?

*Brain damage. Basil had probably given him legitimate brain damage from all this.* That's the only justification. Sunny had been knocked in the skull way too many times. The blonde fought back the urge to scream. Scream and cry.

**Are you really sure you don't hate me, Sunny? Are you sure you still want me around? Whenever you get sick of me... please just say so.**

*Basil holds his hands over his ears, even though the nightmare he's trying to escape lives in his head. Maybe if he plugs up his ears then those thoughts won't be able to escape. Sunny won't hear them.*

**"Basil!** S-Snap out of it... ***Hey!"***

The other boy is growing panicked.

*No more. Basil couldn't take any more of this. He didn't care if he deserved it. This was too much. Just make it stop.*

Basil needed to get Sunny to stop talking. If Basil couldn't keep Sunny from saying something stupid again, then Basil wouldn't be able to keep himself from *doing* something stupid again.

Sunny shakes Basil but Basil ignores him. Sunny shouts at Basil but Basil cannot respond.

*Too much. Its just too much.*

# Drowning

Sunny is still trying to snap him out of it, but Basil's mind is running a mile a minute. The blonde can't force himself to stop... he just has to run out of steam first. He would surely reach the end of this, eventually. Wouldn't he?

*Close. his friend is way too close now.*

If Basil allowed himself to believe that Sunny felt that way about him, then what did that actually mean? What would happen afterwards?

Was he supposed to tell him back? Say he felt the same way about his best friend? Say he had felt that way for as long as they had known each other?

*... And then what?*

It doesn't feel very reasonable at all. Or possible. No matter how many times Basil rolls the concept over inside his mind, it just doesn't make any sense to him. There has to be something more he's missing. Something that clears it all away so that he doesn't have to think about it anymore.

The blonde feels a slight urge to yell out at Sunny again. Demand he explain himself, even if Basil likely wouldn't believe a word that left his mouth. Basil is just ridiculous like that.

He's beginning to come undone. The blonde can feel it. Basil is losing what little of his sanity he still had left.

It was as if Basil lived on a tiny island in the middle of a dark, angry sea. The more days he found himself fighting against his own mind like this, the smaller the island became. Those shadowy waves kept steadily eating away at the shoreline, causing the sand to drift away more and more with every passing moment.

Those irrepressible grey waves had receded for a while after Sunny had visited his little island for the first time in years, but those awful currents would always rise again. That was just how it worked. You could try to enjoy the days on which the raging waters had descended back into the distance, but they would always come back eventually.

Now, Basil's misshapen blotch of earth and sand had been absolutely flooded. There was nowhere to stand anymore that wasn't partially under the water. All Basil could do is try to stay huddled on the island's highest point, silently hoping the waves would eventually recede again. The water is already up to his stomach by now... *and Basil doesn't know how to swim.*

As terrible as it all is, Basil tries to keep his head down. He doesn't want to glance into the distance. He keeps his gaze firmly pointed downwards, and watches as the water beneath him slowly swells upwards in little grey breaths. Basil doesn't want to look out into the deeper water, *because the deeper water always looked back at him.*

Those waves had teeth, after all. Teeth and eyes. Long, creeping, swirling tendrils that Basil had begun to hope would simply sink away into the depths forever...

But they always returned. The tides would always carry SOMETHING back to shore again, no matter how much he tried to hide from it. Its many blackened tentacles moved even faster while submerged in the depths.

Basil had begun to believe that seeing his friend once again had finally scared the horrors inside his mind away, deep enough that they would never return... but that had not been the case at all. If anything, the opposite appeared to be true. The closer Basil grew to Sunny, the more panicked he became. He could feel those countless rows of eyes gazing into the very marrow of his bones, judging him from the inside out... picking him apart... *taking note of his every word and action.*

*Every lie, every mistake, and every selfish desire was observed and tallied, one-by-one.*

And yet in spite of it all, Sunny was still the only glimmer of hope that existed in this terrible place. As terrifying as it was to be near him now, Basil has nothing left to hold onto. He can only pray that whatever is beginning to grow inside his skull will not leak out his mouth and hurt them both.

Every fraction of a second that passes feels like centuries. Basil has reached the absolute edge. This is as long as he could ignore Sunny and still pretend as if he was *mostly* fine. He has to find the will to respond now. He does not have a choice.

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"S-Snap out of it! **Basil!**"

"I'm okay." Basil finally speaks. He removes the hands from over his ears and turns so his friend can look him in the face, although Basil fails to meet his companion's gaze with his own.

"Huh?" Sunny moved backwards slightly, seemingly trying to back away from Basil's personal space now that his friend had finally reacted to his concern.

The blonde casually fiddled with his own fingers. "I'm going to be fine. Sorry. For a second I j-just started uh, p-panicking a little-"

**Panicking? Panicking about what? There's nothing in here to start panicking about other than him. Don't you think you've made him feel horrible enough already? Do you really want to keep torturing him right now? Will that make you feel better?**

Basil nervously scratched at the tips of his nails, still incapable of looking at Sunny directly. "I promise I'm n-not ignoring you, I just needed t-to block out all the um-"

**Block? Block out? It's so quiet in here its ridiculous. Even with all those head injuries there's no way that Sunny is going to believe such an obvious lie. If you're going to expend all the effort to continue lying to him you could at least stop being such a fucking parasite.**

Basil trails off, failing to finish his statement. A brief silence chokes the air between them... before Sunny speaks again, his tone much more serious this time.

"Basil, listen to me."

*I don't want to.*

"It's going to be okay."

*No it isn't.*

"We're going to get out of here."

**He can't say that. Sunny has been all over himself, recently. He can barely even walk. Look at how pathetically he's trying to hold you together.**

"We aren't going to be stuck here forever, I promise." Sunny's voice was more confident now than it had been for days, but it was obvious that Basil's friend was forcing it.

**He promised. You made him promise again. Haha. Why do you always force him to make promises he can't keep? We're going to die in this building.**

No. Sunny was right. They weren't going to be stuck here forever. They were going to escape and return to Faraway and everything would go back to normal...

***Normal.***

*Normal as in Sunny was going to be gone again. It would just be Basil in his house by himself, same as always. Was that really... better?*

*What was the alternative? It wasn't as if they could just continue struggling in this tiny piece of hell forever. Sooner or later, they had to either go back to where they came from or die trying. After all, they shouldn't even be here in the first place. It was some kind of mistake, or curse...*

*But as horrific as it all is, the glimmer of hope still exists here. Because of the fact they had been stolen away, Basil had been allowed to remain by Sunny's side for a while longer than he would have otherwise... and the miserable gardener had made an absolute mess of it.*

It was like being chained together in a cold, empty cage. There was nothing to derive any sense of comfort from in this place besides each other, and they had both done a horrendous job of that so far.

**But it doesn't have to be that way. We could still make everything up to him, if we tried hard enough.**

*Shut up.*

**Are we sure we even want to leave this place? Do we have to? Do we have to leave, Sunny?**

**This place is awful. Its horrible and I hate it. I don't want to be here anymore. It's like a nightmare that keeps going on and on...**

**But when I think about going home... about someone finding us and taking us back to Faraway... about having to say goodbye to you again...**

***I don't want to. I don't want to I don't want to I don't want to.***

*Shut up.*

If nobody is coming, and the phones still didn't work... they really should just leave this place. The snow had been letting up, hadn't it? Sunny and Basil could probably find help by themselves. Basil doubted a place like this was really that far from civilization... they just hadn't been able to go out yet. Once they could stay on their feet again, Basil was sure they'd be able to make their way home.

**No. I don't want to go.**

"I'm sorry..." Sunny speaks, apologizing again.

“Y-You didn’t do anything…” Basil trailed off, miserable.

**You’re going to tell him he didn’t do anything wrong after acting all bitter and resentful? You really think that’s going to make him feel any better after all this? Do you ever run out of these two-faced insults you’ve created?**

“C-Can we just try to go back to sleep for now?” The blonde requested, trying to divert Sunny's attention away from him.

Sunny emotionlessly stared at his friend.

“I’m just s-still really tired and I think its messing with my head. I haven't g-gotten enough sleep yet b-because I got distracted-”

**And whose fault is it that? Is this some kind of joke you’re playing?**

"Are you really alright?" The black-haired creature continued inspecting him.

"Yeah. It just... happens, sometimes." Basil stated. *At least that wasn't technically a lie.*

"Ok."

Sunny seemed to understand that. Because of course he would.

The other boy slowly moves across the massive bed, returning to his previous position at its opposite end. Basil almost tells his friend he doesn't have to go back if he doesn't want to... *but that would have been a terribly selfish thing to say.*

With the blonde's companion having been silenced once more and returned to his idle state across the mattress, Basil's unspeakable words spin back into motion.

Basil doesn't fight them anymore. There was no point. He always loses to himself anyway. Trying to force it all down just makes his panic worse.

The blonde simply lays in silence and lets those lonely phrases build up inside his head and fruitlessly struggle to pass through his lips.

**Isn't it weird how we can both be in the same awful place, in the same awful situation, and still end up like this?**

**I know you're still in the same room as me, in the same bed as me... *but you feel so far away now.* Although I guess even if I moved a little closer, it would probably still feel that way, wouldn't it?**

**I actually always wanted to go to a strange new place with you, just the two of us. But this isn't really what I had in mind.**

**I used to feel like I could go anywhere with you, Sunny… and I'd be okay with it. I tried to convince myself that I didn't care who you liked in that way… because as long as we were best friends, I would always be special to you, and you would always be special to me. Even if you didn't like me the way I liked you, I would still have had a permanent place in your life.**

**I was okay with that, because I was so sure things would always be that way. Now I just feel really unsure about everything. I'm sorry, Sunny. If I'm really still your best friend, I should be able to understand what you're thinking… *but I don't.***

**You are still Sunny, aren't you? The same old Sunny that I always knew? You didn't seem to have changed much from back then, but then you went and...**

**I don't know if the Sunny I knew would do that. But I guess we are both a little older now. *Lonelier*. I'm sorry.**

**At first I thought you just didn't mean it, but now I think you're probably just a little confused. Which is okay! I'm confused too… especially being stuck together right now.**

**But when we're alone together like this... all I can think about is every horrible thing I've ever done, and every moment I spent waiting for you to come back. All of it just buzzes around in my skull and I can't think straight.**

**I'm so creepy when I'm like this, aren't I? But I guess I've always been like this. Its because I liked you too much that I asked you to do such a terrible thing. I thought I**

**could protect you that way... but that's not what happened at all.**

**Its because I liked you too much that I tried to hide what happened from everyone. So you shouldn't like *me*, right Sunny? That would be really wrong, wouldn't it?**

**Even if I really started to believe you... it would hurt too much.**

**So you won't ever do something like that again, will you? You and me can't be doing stuff like that, okay? I know neither of us has anyone else to rely on anymore, but there has to be a limit, right? Every time you and me get too close, something bad happens...**

**Even if I want to. *Would you believe me if I said I wanted to?***

**I don't know about you, but... that was my first kiss. It was really mean of you to just take it away like that all of a sudden. B-But I'm still g-glad it was with y-you...**

**Isn't that gross? Isn't it wrong of me to feel that way after all that nasty stuff I said?**

**I think it has to be wrong. It wouldn't hurt this much if it wasn't. That's just how it is for the two of us, huh? So whether or not you actually meant it... doesn't really matter.**

**Besides, you're trapped here with me right now, you know? If you tried to get up close like that again and regretted it, you wouldn't even be able to get away from me.**

**You're way too hurt to m-manage anything like that.**

**I just mean... if I moved over and kissed you back right now, you wouldn't even be able to escape.**

**Haha.**

***I hate myself.***

# Picnics

*The asphalt rolled by in an almost never-ending stretch to destinations that would always remain empty, the person who gave those places meaning having long since departed from them. The quiet lull of the empty road ahead was relaxing, in a way. Relaxing enough that it carried Hero off to memories that had long hidden themselves in the darkened corners of his mind. Memories of beautiful things that he was no longer sure he wanted to remember. Memories of Mari.*

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It had been a while since they last had a picnic, and today was more or less the perfect weather to do so. Hero had tried making a lemon pie for their outdoor lunch, and was excited to see what Mari would think of it. Such a dessert was a bit out of his comfort zone, but Hero thought it ended up tasting pretty good. Making it had ended up being the easy part. The hard part was keeping kel away from it before it was actually time to eat.

Hero placed his citrus dessert into a small cooler that he prepackaged with a few things before yelling at Kel that it was time to leave. The door to the room shot open and Kel scrambled down the stairs so fast that Hero thought he was going to trip and split open his skull. But before Hero could even chastise him for running in the house like that, the boy had already vanished out the front door. His brother didn't even put any shoes on.

Hero opened the cooler again and removed an orange joe that he had placed inside for a certain someone. The caffeinated can was placed back into the fridge where it belonged. He didn't need it today. Hero thought that beverage was best saved for another time, for both Kel's sanity and his own.

Hero double-checked his belongings one last time before walking out the front door. He hoped Kel hadn't been running the entire way there. Not that it mattered, Hero was unlikely to ever catch up either way. How was Kel always so fast? Maybe Hero needed to take up jogging or something of the sort.

Hero took a deep breath and tried not to think about how Summer was already halfway over. Only a few more years left until he would finally become a REAL adult, as his dad often put it. Hero wasn't one to worry much about his own future, but seeing how often those worries were shoved into Mari's face had infected him with similar concerns. Most of them were not for himself, though.

She seemed more and more worn out every time Hero saw her, but she was also good at hiding it. Did Mari really need to be studying that much? Maybe Hero should have been trying harder, too...

*Mari would sometimes joke about how she would become rich when they were older and hire him as her own personal chef, but Hero had hoped that would stay a joke for the most part.*

Carrying the weight of their parents expectations was something Mari and Hero shared in common, though he wished they didn't. At the very least, Hero hoped she could relax for today. Relax and eat lemon pie.

*Hopefully, 'real adults' with 'real jobs' would still have time to bake lemon pies for their friends.*

Hero finally made it to the park and started creeping into the woods that concealed their favorite hangout spot. Kel had already reached the clearing, and was seemingly terrorizing a poor family of ducks that had stopped for water. No sight of any of their other friends yet. With no one else having yet arrived to the picnic, Kel had taken to sharing his boundless enthusiasm with a flock of avian victims. They seemed less than amused by his desire for feathery companionship.

Hero heard the snapping of twigs behind him. His face lit up as he took note of a girl with long black hair sneaking into the clearing from the woods. Hero had seen that face a thousand times, but even still, her knowing smile always managed to make his heartbeat bounce out of sync.

She carried a signature basket of hidden treats, packaged with the same checkerboard blanket that she always brought during events like these.

Sunny followed shortly behind her, but Mari's brother didn't give Hero the silent greeting he usually did. The boy seemed rather preoccupied, a slight scowl on his face lingering as he stared down at his own feet. Sunny didn't much seem like he wanted to be here today, which was rare for him. Maybe something happened? Or maybe he just didn't get enough sleep.

"Hey! Sorry we're late." Mari apologized. "Mewo had a bit of an accident again, hehe..."

"Well it's no problem anyway, only me and Kel are here at the moment, haha."

"So what was the mystery dessert I've been hearing so much about?" Mari inquired with a smirk on her face.

"It's nothing special just a chilled lemon pie." Hero stated, glancing down at the cooler in his hands.

"Ooh, that sounds really nice, actually." Mari claimed. "My big strong Hero is honing his culinary craft~"
The chef felt a hint of warmth creeping into his face.

Sunny ignored their flirting and continued downwards in the direction of the water, Kel now dashing over to say hello.

Hero helped Mari unpack her picnic basket and lay everything out for their friend's arrival. Luckily, today was not particularly windy, so they wouldn't have to worry about any of their

snacks escaping into the air. Somehow, Hero and Mari's hands kept meeting one another, each of them reaching for the same objects at the same moments in time. A less-knowledgeable viewer might assume that they were experiencing some random series of romcom-style coincidences, but Hero knew better. Mari was doing that on purpose, just to mess with him. Not that he really minded it.

After a few more moments of picnic prep and Kel management, a girl with a pink bow in her hair scrambled out of the woods, eyes gleaming with excitement. Hero and Mari waved as Aubrey made her way towards them. Sunny and Kel were still watching the ducks by themselves, but Kel had taken note of Aubrey's arrival and dashed back to the picnic zone with Sunny in tow.

"Hi everybody!!" Aubrey beamed. "I brought pears if anyone wants one!" The girl proudly declared, removing the backpack she was carrying on her shoulders and joining the older kids in the grass.

*"Heckyeahit'stimetoeat-"* Kel raised his greedy mitts towards the helpless food items stored in Mari's basket but the older brother deflected his invasive hands.

"Not so fast, Kel." Hero scowled. "Basil isn't here yet, it would be rude to start eating without him.

"Ehh... I doubt Basil would care." Kel argued. "He wouldn't want you to let me go hungry like this! It's a crime!" The boy objected.

Mari laughed. "Actually uh, Basil called us earlier and said he isn't going to be able to make it today."

"He isn't?" Aubrey pouted.

"Nope, sorry." Mari shook her head. "He said he had something to do today so we'll just have to eat without him.

"Aww, that sucks." Kel deflated. Sunny scowled and walked away again, seemingly not interested in eating with the rest of them. Hero's brows lowered.

The four remaining picnic-enthusiasts finally began eating while Sunny returned to the pier to watch ducks by himself. Kel and Aubrey would have likely commented on the fact that Sunny was absent from their lunch, but the two of them had already gotten themselves entangled in some sort of argument. It hadn't even been fifteen minutes.

The disagreement had finally seemed to calm down while Aubrey was finishing up one of her pears, but Kel reignited their altercation by slowly and silently creeping up behind the girl and placing a discarded cicada shell into her hair.

"Woah, Aubrey look out! There's a bug on your head!" Kel exclaimed after casually taking a seat back onto the picnic blanket.

Aubrey squinted and subconsciously raised her hand towards her hair. Upon brushing her fingers into the crusted shell of the long-departed insect, Aubrey screeched in panic and flung the exoskeleton from her hair. Once she took note of Kel's cruel trick, Aubrey stood up and began furiously chasing after him with a No. 2 pencil being wielded like a weapon in her right hand. Hero hoped she wasn't actually going to do anything nasty with that if she caught him. Kel had pretty much been asking for it, though.

"I should probably go stop them before this gets any worse." Hero noted, swiveling his head to watch as the two of them continued their vicious chase into the woods.

"Or you could stay here with me and continue enjoying the fruits of your labor... *Get it? Fruits? Lemon? Hehe...*"

"Uh, *good one,* Mari."

Hero's gaze drifted back over to Sunny, who was still sitting at the water's edge with the family of ducks Kel had been irritating earlier. Mari's brother was simply staring into the water by himself, seemingly lost in his own thoughts. He was so quiet and so motionless that the ducks had actually drifted over, right next to him... but Sunny didn't seem to notice or care.

Hero gestured gently in the younger boy's direction before whispering.

"Hey, uh... is something wrong with Sunny? He doesn't exactly seem like himself today."

Mari glanced over at Sunny sitting by himself and pursed her lips.

"Yeah. He's not. Remember what I said earlier about how Basil had something he needed to do today? That wasn't exactly true... Sunny and Basil actually had a fight yesterday and I just wanted to cover for the two of them in case they didn't want the others to get up in their personal business." Mari explained. "You know how they are."

Hero squinted. He almost felt like he hadn't heard Mari right. "A fight? Sunny and Basil got into a *fight?"*

"Well, an argument I mean." She clarified.

"Really? About what?"

Mari broke eye contact with Hero and glanced into the distance behind him as Kel burst back out of the woods, finally starting to appear winded as an infuriated Aubrey was beginning to gain on him, her face flushed with rage.

"I'll tell you later." Mari smirked, finally standing up in preparation to dispel Kel and Aubrey's growing war before that pencil ended up shoved into Kel's cerebrum. "Alright, break it up you two! It's time for pie!"

Hero began slicing up the dessert while he pondered what Mari had told him a second ago.

*Sunny fighting with Aubrey? Hero doubted it. Sunny fighting with Kel? Maybe in a joking way...*

*Sunny fighting with Mari? Well... all siblings fight sometimes. Even if Hero thought it seemed fairly unlikely.*

But fighting with *Basil?* Hero couldn't picture Sunny fighting with Basil. Hero had difficulty picturing Sunny having a serious disagreement with anyone, let alone with Basil. On the opposite end, He wasn't consciously aware that the blonde was even capable of having a fight about absolutely anything. Hero could not think of a single instance in which he had even seen Basil get angry, *ever.*

The young man shuddered. Hero's dad always used to tell him that it was the people who cared about each other the most who argued the worst. The people closest to you are always the people most capable of hurting you. That more or less made sense to Hero, but it made him a little anxious. Did that mean him and Mari would end up arguing like mom and dad did some day? Hero wasn't sure if he was capable of winning an argument with her.

Hero found himself lost in such thoughts for a few minutes while he watched the others eat pie. The speed at which Kel inhaled his slice of the dessert was seriously unsettling. It wasn't exactly a tough food to digest, but his brother still needed to chew a *little*.

The entirety of the citrus snack quickly disappeared into his unflinching maw. Kel then stretched out and yawned, seemingly having satisfied himself. After a brief moment of rest, the boy finally appeared to take note of Sunny's position and his eyes quickly widened.

"Look at how close those ducks are! How did he do that?? I bet if we used Sunny as bait we could-"

*Hero's bird-terrorist brother scrambled to his feet and was seemingly about to dash in Sunny's direction before Mari suddenly stopped him.*

"Not so fast, Kel." Mari objected. "Just because we had a picnic that doesn't change what day it is."

Kel collapsed back onto the picnic blanket and let out a pained groan of unrestrained suffering. Hero's brother deflated like a hot air balloon that had just plummeted into the ground. Mari reached into her handbag and removed a rather-heavy-looking textbook from its depths. Kel seemed to somehow grow even more solemn as the book was unveiled from its hiding place.

"Look on the bright side!" Mari insisted. "We get to do this outside today, and there's no wind!" Hero smirked while he watched his brother's overexaggerated mental pain.

About a month prior, Hero had pointed out to his parents (much to Kel's annoyance) that his brother was having significant difficulty learning mathematics at the same rate as the other kids in his class. Hero was not intentionally going out of his way to get his brother in trouble,

but the trend of Kel's mathematical decline had been carrying on for quite some time by then and Hero was surprised that both of his parents had failed to acknowledge it at all, so he pointed the trend out himself. Hero was prepared to apologize to his brother for getting him into hot water with their parents, but to his continued surprise, neither their mother or father seemed particularly concerned about it... in fact, they barely seemed to care at all.

To the older brother, it appeared as if... *that's all mom and dad expected from Kel, and they were therefore okay with it.*

That really got under Hero's skin. Kel wasn't stupid, if he was falling behind it was because nobody was putting in the effort to explain anything to him properly. Half the reason Kel fell behind in certain areas was because their parents would never reward or acknowledge him in the way they should have been doing this entire time. Hero had suggested to their parents that it would likely be in their best interest to hire a tutor for Kel, but his father said they didn't currently have the money for something like that. Hero had then suggested that he could start tutoring Kel himself, but his parents didn't want him focusing too much of his energy on trying to catch his brother up in something that he needed to figure out for himself when Hero already had enough to do piling up on his own plate.

Frustrated, Hero then made his final suggestion. He presented the idea that they have Mari tutor Kel. Mari was very well-accomplished academically, she was looking for an easy part-time job she could work while in her teens, and Hero knew she wouldn't charge them much for her efforts. Finally, after what had been far too much time invested in something Hero felt his parents should have been handling themselves, the older brother got their mom and dad to agree to having Mari tutor Kel in math until he could catch up.

Hero should have figured that suggesting they hire Mari would work. He knew all too well that both of his parents were quite fond of Mari, in an obnoxious *wink-wink nudge-nudge* kind of way. Geez. He was just a teenager.

Still, Hero wished Mari's parents felt that way about **him**.

Hero had assumed that Kel would have been a little more upset with his brother for essentially setting him up with additional homework that he would not have had otherwise, but the younger boy didn't seem all that bothered by it. Hero assumed that was because Kel liked when Mari was around, too. At least Mari would pay attention to him and listen to his stupid jokes.

*Hero would've been lying if he had claimed that getting Mari to come over more often was not a shadowy secondary motive squirming in his head.*

Mari popped open her book of math problems and Kel took a reluctant seat beside her, a look of boredom and disinterest already beginning to spread rapidly across his face. Kel appeared as if he was going to suddenly pass out from this small hint of homework exposure, but his expression brightened back a bit when Aubrey took a seat in class as well, resting her legs beside him.

Aubrey was not an intended member of Kel's study session, but she seemingly could not resist sticking around to poke fun at Hero's brother for his readily-apparent lack of mathematical ability.

Hero hoped she wouldn't be too hard on him. Kel never seemed particularly bothered by his scholastic difficulties, but Hero always wondered if he was hiding some kind of shame about it. That would explain why he hadn't spent much energy resisting the idea of being tutored by their friend.

With the rest of the group now occupied, Hero glanced over at Sunny once again. Mari's little brother looked as if the life had been completely drained out of him. Hero felt like he should go over and say something, but without having any real info on what had happened he would probably just annoy Sunny and make an ass of himself.

What kind of thing would Sunny and Basil possibly fight about? Did it have to do with one of their other friends? *That's the only thing that Hero could think of...* but the rest of their group seemed entirely unbothered by whatever it was that kept occupying Sunny's busy mind.

Kel and Aubrey were now both entirely engaged in the process of filling out math worksheets. Aubrey possessed a look of smug overconfidence on her face, while Kel was seemingly beginning to gnaw his writing utensil in half. It was an extremely rare moment of silence being shared between the two of them.

Hero took a piece of scrap paper from Mari's bag and subsequently looted on of her mechanical pencils. Mari raised an eyebrow at his questionable theft while Hero began to scribble a small message which he then passed back to her.

*Sunny seems like he's still really beat up about Basil. He still hasn't even eaten anything. Will you tell me what happened now?*

Mari smirked and scribbled her response underneath his question.

*Wow Hero, you're really going to interrupt my math lesson to ask about my little brother's personal business?*

Hero squinted at Mari as she had to cover her mouth to prevent the others from hearing her snicker at her own teasing messages.

Mari began scritching away again and then passed Hero a second slip stating it was too difficult to explain in notes and that he'd have to wait. Hero sighed and plated himself a small slice of his own pie, which he somberly consumed while listening to the sound of birds chirping in the trees and pencils scratching at the paper beneath them.

Hero wasn't used to anyone in their circle of friends fighting with one another. Well, okay... Kel and Aubrey fought a **lot**, but they never actually seemed as if they were in any danger of genuinely refusing each other's company, that was just the way they were around one another. This was different.

Hero was the oldest, so he felt he should know how one was supposed to handle a situation like this. If he got a little more info about their conflict, maybe he could-

---

"Hey, you just passed our exit." Aubrey suddenly pulled Hero from his memories and demanded he pay attention to what he was actually doing.

"Oh, shit... *oops."*

# A Broken Window

Chapter Notes

Thanks for reading.

It remained dark outside, but there was no further snow that day. Sunny felt as if the frost on the window had started to melt away slightly, but maybe that was just his imagination. He stared at the tiny interlocking trails of ice as they weaved their way across the glass, forming a cold tapestry that clouded their view of the world outside.

This bed had been quite comfortable at first, but Sunny had started to become intensely sick of it. He missed his bed back home. He didn't have too much trouble falling asleep, (even with the pain he was in) but he still wasn't used to sleeping outside of his own house again. No matter how many times he drifted off, his eyes would quickly reopen minutes later and the entire cycle would repeat.

The pair had remained in bed for more hours than Sunny could count, neither being in a condition that encouraged engaging in any movement. They had scarcely been in motion at all. That persistent hope the pair had been holding onto that today would be the day someone would finally locate them had withered into a lifeless stump which now seeped with a steadily-growing fear. A surreal sense of detachment from reality followed closely behind. Sunny wasn't sure he believed in divine punishment, but their horrendous experiences in this building carried an almost supernatural air of vengeance at this point. It felt like they had been trapped inside an endless cycle of repeated miseries.

That wasn't really the case, though. Things had actually begun looking up for the both of them... before Sunny expressed something he seemingly shouldn't have.

*He should think about something else.*

...

At least the lights were still on.

...

Sunny considered what their next action should be if no one was going to find them. The only part of this building that they had not already seen the entirety of by this point was the massive furniture storage space beneath them, but neither boy had the energy or fortitude to creep down into that dungeon at present.

Sunny doubted they would find anything useful in that giant hole anyway, although he was admittedly a little curious about what it would look like with the lights on. There was just so

much crazy stuff down there. Maybe checking some of it out later would cheer Basil up... or at least distract him.

But that was probably just wishful thinking. Sunny wondered if Basil was even going to let him go anywhere other than the bathroom at this point. His head throbbed.

Sunny glanced at the other boy for a moment. Basil had finally left the bed for the first time in hours, but he still lingered within the display room. Sunny had earlier expressed a general belief that neither of them should currently go anywhere without the other given their respective physical conditions (and the terrifying prospects of their arrival to this place), but Sunny also recognized that sharing a room together right now was extremely difficult for the both of them... *to put it mildly.*

*Sunny listened to the sound of crinkling foil bags and crunching plastic bottles occurring a few feet from him. It seemed that some amount of distraction from the horror had become necessary.*

Basil had begun carefully reorganizing the garbage in the room. There was no trash can or wastebasket in this furniture display, so he had taken to sticking their shared refuse onto the coffee table instead.

Cans and wrappers, bottles and bags. One by one they each joined their comrades in Basil's little organized kingdom of garbage. A perfect little realm of trash. Sunny wondered if Basil really was just trying to keep himself occupied.

That garbage isn't exactly being taken care of, but it can be **seen**. It's been neatly assembled and put on display. Something about that almost came across as poetic, *but in a horrendous way.*

Finishing would be easy, though. Once they grabbed a trash bag or something of the sort from the dining hall later all those unwanted items would be swept away at once.

If only everything could be that easy.

Sunny considered asking Basil if he wanted help cleaning, but by the time he stood up the blonde would likely already be done with his garbage quest. There wasn't that much to pick up this time. Besides, Sunny was more than a bit anxious about saying anything to Basil at this point. Neither had spoken in a long while, and it was likely that if one of them tried to resume the same casual conversation which had occurred that morning it would now feel extremely forced. Basil appeared to have calmed down again after his sudden panic earlier, but the other boy knew all too well how tenuous that composure was.

Regardless, Sunny wasn't sure if he could risk creating another disagreement right now. If he were to say something particularly wrong, Basil could easily just walk out of the room and his friend would likely never be able to catch up to him.

*But maybe it would still be better to try and force it, though. Maybe he should still try to force a conversation instead of continuing to endure this painful, empty silence.*

There had to be... **something** that could be said, even if that something was not particularly important. Maybe they really could go back to their shared reminiscing... *but it was probably best not to.* There was likely no way to discuss the past without that discussion slowly sliding towards something terrible that they were both avoiding. There were still so many things between them that the pair had yet to touch on at all... things that would seem almost impossibly difficult to discuss even on the quietest of days and under the most relaxing circumstances.

Those conversations would have been excruciatingly painful even before Sunny had pressed himself on his friend. Now it just seemed hopeless.

Every pleasant memory they ever shared together was forever tainted by what Sunny had done that day. Her name was still mostly a forbidden word between the two of them- something almost never to be mentioned out of respect for their shared traumas.

That self-imposed taboo had appeared to have been lifting a little, recently... but after everything that had happened here it was unlikely that a serious conversation about what the two of them did that night was going to occur anytime soon. Sunny couldn't help but wonder if such a dialogue would really make things better between the two of them, or simply much, **much** worse.

*So speaking about the past was likely far off the table. The present, meanwhile, was a rather miserable topic... and the future barely even seemed to be visible in this place.*

The persistent ice that still lingered on the windows had seemingly prevented any and all hope from entering this abandoned building.

*Turn. Glance. Turn. Glance.*

Sunny kept trying to pick apart the emotion displaying in Basil's face, but was attempting to do so using only the occasional small and quick glances in the blonde's direction. He's trying to conceal his gaze even though it was abundantly obvious that there was nothing else moving in the room- *nothing else to possibly be glancing at other than Basil.*

*The fact that he was the only thing to observe was probably why Basil looked like that.*

The look on Basil's face was relaxed and neutral... but somehow a little **too** neutral. Sunny knew better than anyone that wasn't what Basil looked like by default. By default, Basil had a tendency to appear a bit anxious, confused... *sad.* He had looked like that for as long as Sunny had known him. Even his most genuine smiles betrayed some kind of deeply-concealed discomfort. It was if his face always displayed some persistent hint of emotion, no

matter how hard he tried to restrain it. That general visibility was why the other boy's current blankness made Sunny feel so unnerved.

Basil wasn't supposed to look like that.

The fact that his face was entirely devoid of emotion was what gave Basil away. The expressionless face he was currently wearing was not genuine, but a mask. The blonde was putting up a front, trying to act as if he was less afraid and upset and tired than he actually was. He was still hiding how much pain he was in, just as he had been doing for days before.

Sunny felt a squirming pain in his own stomach. He couldn't even think about Basil's wound without the mere mental image of it causing a shared reaction within himself.

*Should Sunny say something? Would saying anything to him be more reassuring than this silence?*

*Silence.* Sunny had grown so accustomed to it for so long. Maybe he should consider himself lucky that he even had the opportunity to speak to Basil about *anything* right now, given how much time had passed in their respective lives. Maybe he should simply say whatever he wanted to in this moment... because silence had been the act which had ruined them both.

Sunny was consumed by his own thoughts, frozen by those twisted worries buzzing around in his head. There was no chance of him ever saying anything to his friend while paralyzed in this inescapable mental state.

**Then it finally happens.**

*Sunny had been waiting for it, but he half-expected that Basil was just going to leave them there, even though the blonde already knows that his friend is aware of what he had tucked away. What he had hidden in the darkness.*

Basil kneels down to the end of the bed and sticks his hands under the frame. He begins picking up orange cans that had previously been concealed. The blonde does so slowly and wordlessly, as if this garbage holds no further meaning than anything else in the room that he had already cleaned... *even though that could not be further from the truth.* Basil's eyes are firmly locked on exactly what he's doing and nothing more, but it could not be more obvious that he anticipates Sunny watching this. They both know he is.

Those orange cans are being assembled one by one into the rest of the garbage. Each can one more additional layer onto the growing pile. Every empty beverage disappears into the crowd of less-noteworthy trash, the deeper meaning behind their metal shells being discarded along with them. One Joe, two Joe, three Joe...

*The cheery labels on those caffeinated beverages almost seemed to be mocking Sunny.*

The boy couldn't help but observe that this felt like some kind of test. It seemed as if Sunny was being intentionally presented with another opportunity to bring up something difficult, and Basil wants to see if he'll take it. Sunny isn't sure if what he's looking at is an invitation or a warning. *An empty sigh of defeat or a silent threat.*

*Why? Why was he doing that. Did he **want** to have another argument? Sunny doubted it.*

So maybe that intentionality was all being imagined by Sunny himself. Maybe Basil is just picking them up so casually in this moment because drawing any attention to it would make the act stand out even more than it already did, and the two of them had bigger things to worry about right now than Basil's concerning refusal to sleep from hours prior.

But the sight of those cans still corrupts Sunny, Agitates him in a way he could not possibly imagine something so innocuous ever would. His already-hopeless thoughts begin to compound upon themselves over and over.

Sunny's mind starts constructing false words that slip out of Basil's mouth, fictional statements that exist only inside the boy's own head.

*"So what? I did end up resting, didn't I? It's none of your business how much I sleep, Sunny. One of us needed to stay awake to make sure everything in here was safe. It's not like **you** can judge me for keeping secrets. J-Just leave me alone."*

Basil would probably never say anything like that... *but right now it felt like he could.*

...

*Maybe Sunny wanted him to.* If Basil said he hated being around Sunny now, at least that would feel genuine. But perhaps that was just an excuse to be lazy. An excuse to stop trying to fix things between him and his friend. Sunny was simply looking for a reason to give up again, like he always did. That was probably why he was thinking this way...

...

Or maybe it was because... *those words would be an excuse for Sunny to be angry too.*

The boy grit his teeth slightly. It might have been deserved that Basil would be upset with him after what he had done... but this cold shoulder was excessively cruel. Sunny didn't ask Basil to forgive him for what he did earlier, he only asked Basil to listen. All he asked was an opportunity to explain himself, and Basil would not agree to it. Even something as simple as that was too much for him, and so Sunny was promptly shut out. He was immediately walled off from his friend following a swift expression of discontent.

*Maybe...* **maybe Basil was the one who had been overreacting?** It was just kissing. It wasn't as if he was forcing Basil to feel the same way as him. Sunny's friend could just say he didn't like him like that. That's all he had to say to keep the other boy away from him forever. It was so easy.

*I don't like you that way.* Six little words were all Basil had to say and Sunny would get the hint forever.

Besides, it was just in the heat of an emotional moment. It's not like Sunny would have even done that in the first place if Basil had just been honest about the fact that he had tried to kill himself...

***Kill himself***. Kill himself and then hide the evidence away, even though it was written in bold print on his flesh. Sunny's breath hitched in his throat.

He thought about how long Basil had been concealing it from him. Sunny thought about how many conversations they had while the constant pain from that wound must have been eating away at Basil. *Why? Why would he hide something like that?*

Hadn't both of them been trying to be honest with each other again? What about all the smiles and apologies they had shared back in the hospital? Were those all fake? Just pleasant little lies to make each other feel better before everything fell apart again?

They had been getting better together, hadn't they? So why wouldn't Basil just tell him?

*That wasn't fair.*

Basil might have been angry at Sunny for "lying," but **he** had been lying too.

*Sure...* Sunny had shoved his feelings into Basil's face (mouth), ***but so what?*** It wasn't as if Basil hadn't shoved his feelings into Sunny's face, first. The eye missing from his head was proof of it. Basil was really going to resent him for what he did after the blonde had done something like **that**?

*What a bad joke.* Basil should've just gotten over it. This just meant they were even now. Sunny had confessed that he liked Basil, and Basil had confessed that he wanted Sunny dead. Oh, how hard that must have been for him.

*Boo hoo, Basil. What a terrible tragedy.*

Sunny continued festering.

*Just say it. Just admit YOU were the one who hated ME all along.*

His head throbbed and his eye stung. If Sunny coughed right now and blood came out of his mouth, he wouldn't even be surprised, and he wouldn't even care. He tried to run his fingers across the back of his head, but all it did was make his skull cry out in discomfort.

The boy tried to stop lingering on his obsessive anger and focus on something more productive. All this regret and irritation wasn't getting him anywhere.

Sunny needed to check on his eye. He has only done so once since they had gotten stranded here, and he felt as if he needed to check again to make sure he was still healing correctly. It felt kind of stuffy and itchy under his bandage at the moment, so he figured he should stand up and go look at himself in the mirror, but the idea of getting up again felt rather daunting...

If Sunny stood up, then what would Basil say? Would he run to his side, insisting that Sunny was incapable of walking by himself? Would he stare incredulously at him, and ask what the hell he thought he was doing? Would he just watch him and do nothing at all?

Would any of it make a difference?

...

*Who cares*. Maybe Sunny would just take off his bandage right here without moving an inch. He would just expose it to the air a little to relieve this stuffy feeling. Maybe Basil would see, but so what? It was his fault Sunny was missing an eye in the first place. If he couldn't stand looking at the results of his own actions, that was his problem.

Sunny thought back to the moment after he woke up in the hospital in which he noticed for the first time that his eye really was completely gone. Initially, he had assumed that it was just damaged, and that's why he had so many bandages on his face... but in all honesty he barely even registered it. Sunny had been so immediately consumed by his unrestrained, burning desire to tell his friends the truth that the eye now missing from his skull escaped his mind completely. They needed to know. They deserved to know. Sunny was moving away, and that could've been the last chance he would ever be able to talk to them while they were all in the same room.

He needed to tell them as quickly as he could, or he might have actually passed out from the boundless weight of that guilt and fear.

It was not until well afterward, after Sunny had spoken to Basil and returned to his own room, that it finally dawned on him. He only had a single eye from then on. He stared at his own reflection in the window.

All of the pain he had caused everyone in his life, all of the pain he had caused *Basil*, was now forever written on his face... that violent splatter of red ink having only been temporarily concealed by the white parchment that wrapped its way around his head.

Too see oneself missing an eye was a horrible thing. A somewhat dissociative experience. A part of Sunny that had granted him half of everything he ever saw in the world was now missing. Now that it was gone, it almost felt as if a tiny curtain within him had been forever drawn closed.

But, in a twisted way, it almost felt hopeful. This was the kind of appearance that suited him. His dull mask had fallen, and revealed the wound that he'd concealed for four miserable, inescapable years. This scar was proof that things were changing, wasn't it? Was he a different person now? Was all of it finally over? Would it ever be?

...

Mari. *Mari Mari Mari.* All of the long-hidden memories of his sister flooded his mind freely now. Sunny felt so terribly sick with sadness that he expected to throw up his entire stomach upon waking in that hospital bed. He had spent so long feeling nothing, and now all of those permanently-restrained emotions had exploded into his head at once.

Basil smiled at him. Sunny smiled first, so it wasn't weird to smile back...

But it still felt impossible that Basil actually did. Was it really okay to do that? He wondered if the two of them were going to be alright, then wondered if it was selfish to even think something like that.

Didn't Basil know that everyone hated him now? Didn't he know that they would probably hate him too, because of what Sunny did? He didn't have to smile back if he didn't want to.

He could hate Sunny as much as he wanted.

Hate him. Despise him. He could respond however he wanted, say anything he needed to... as long as he didn't say nothing. Anything but nothing.

*Sunny dug his fingernails into the mattress beneath him.*

---

"If you want to tie me up again, I'll let you. It isn't a b-big deal, I promise."

*Huh?*

"What are you talking about?" Sunny responds to his friend's sudden suggestion.

"If you're worried I'm going to run off again and do something stupid, you can restrain me if you want. I know you p-probably can't trust me now after all the stuff I was hiding."

Sunny's innumerable objections all caught in his throat at once. "I- *What?* No. Why are you asking me if I'd want something like that?"

"B-Because you've been glaring at me for the last twenty minutes?" Basil mumbled.

*Oops.*

"After all the stuff that's going on, you really think its a good idea for either of us to be tied up?" Sunny asked.

*"I didn't m-mean like-"* Basil tried to explain himself. "I just meant that while we're both in the room alone, if you had started to feel unsafe around m-me or anything like that-"

*"Basil-"*

"I'm just saying that if you d-don't trust me anymore that I'm fine with being restrained again, if that w-would make you feel better." Basil calmly concluded his ridiculous sales pitch as if the idea he had just presented was actually reasonable in any way.

"No! I'm not tying you up again. *Why would I want to do that?"* Sunny scratched at the side of his face.

"It was just a s-suggestion..."

"How are we even talking about this?" Sunny hissed, suddenly unsure if he was asking Basil or himself. "Do you *want* me to tie you up?"

Those thoughtless words left Sunny's throat for about a half-second before he realized his incredulous question had drifted far too close to home... and the worst possible thing to bring up right now. This was the *second* time he had made such a mistake. He really should not have said that. Sunny winced slightly and braced himself for a nuclear reaction from his friend.

Basil's face suddenly turned a vivid shade of red, but to Sunny's surprise, Basil didn't seem shocked or angry, only taken off guard... *flustered,* even. Either way, the disagreement moved on too fast for Sunny to spend any more time considering the origins of his friend's sudden embarrassment. All that mattered was that however Basil had taken that sarcastic inquiry, it wasn't in the way that Sunny was worried he would.

"No? *What?* N-No!" Basil short-circuited.

"Then why are we even talking about this right now?" Sunny countered.

"I just-" The other boy trailed off again. Basil let out a tiny growl of leaked frustration. Sunny thought he sounded strangely cute when making a weird sound like that... *but having such a thought only made him feel even more annoyed, for some reason.*

"You said you weren't going to freak out again, was that not true? Is there something else you're not telling me that would make me want to tie you up?" Sunny continued asking accusatory questions, incapable of hiding the growing irritation that bubbled up in his voice.

"N-No!" Basil quickly denied.

"Good, then I trust you and we don't have to keep doing this all the time." Sunny put an end to this discussion.

"Okay, I'm sorry! S-Sorry I even brought this up..." Basil shrunk backwards and momentarily rubbed at his forearm with his palm.

In truth, staying mad at Basil for pretty much anything was a rather extreme effort, as Basil was himself very bad at maintaining anger. He could seemingly only argue with Sunny for but a few lines of shared irritation before the tears started to creep up in the corners of his eyes and he failed to maintain the illusion that his rage was not simply sadness and misery hiding behind a heavily-damaged mask.

A moment of silence passes.

"... And you tied me up, first." Sunny quietly grumbled under his breath.

*He really didn't need to say that. Sunny just couldn't help but bring it up again because he was such a child.*

"That was different! I was trying... trying..."

Basil continued staring at him for a moment, but the other boy never finished his argument. He merely lowered his gaze to the floor in something that might have been guilt or shame, but in all likelihood was simply a shared expression of suffering. Sunny had not been able to

bring himself to say a word to his friend after everything they had spoken of earlier, and it appeared neither could Basil. Maybe the blonde had just presented this idea because he couldn't think of anything more to say. Basil quietly exhaled through his nose.

"Sorry." Sunny apologizes.

It had been growing for a while, but both seemed almost entirely incapable of talking to each other freely now. The silence was soft and gentle, something that had formed from a shared desire to prevent inflicting additional harm on the other… but it was also cold and empty. A kind of lifeless, hopeless void. Something Sunny was all too familiar with.

It was not at all pleasant for things to have become like this, but perhaps it was better than the alternative. Everything they had shared with each other had appeared to only make things harder on the both of them, despite their best efforts.

And so, a polite silence had formed.

But that silence still held some amount of solidarity, despite everything. The wall of long-held guilt and resentment which Sunny and Basil's actions had raised from the ground had not been removed between them, but it had been given a tiny window. A window which enabled one miserable boy to see the other… and if not alleviate each others suffering, at least share in it. Nothing was being done about this pain, but at least it could now be seen.

When they did speak, that window acted like a two-way confessional, through which each sinner could listen to the other explain in great detail how sorry they were for all the things they had said and done to themselves, each other, and everyone else. Perhaps those tireless expressions of guilt needed to reach a climax eventually, but it was as of now unimaginable that either would apologize enough.

Sunny comes to the realization that Basil was right about what he had said before, about sticking together. That had been one of his worst mistakes, after everything. And yet, no matter how many times he tried to imagine their lives playing out any other way after that night, he simply couldn't.

For those four years, the only friend in the world he had that also knew what Sunny had done that night was Basil. Nobody else could peer back at him through that window.

The window may have become a thing of tentative comfort now, but back then it was more frightening than anything Sunny could have possibly imagined.

That's why Sunny hid himself away. Why he stopped responding to the knocks at his door. He couldn't stand being seen by his friend even for a second. When Basil looked at him, he still looked at him with pity, hope… *affection,* even.

*Affection.* Even after Basil's had been the only one with a front row seat to Sunny's disastrous sin, he had still cared for him exactly how he'd done before. Perhaps even more than before, somehow.

That was one of many reasons Sunny hid himself away. He couldn't endure being looked at like that. It made him despise himself so much he would become physically sick. Basil would look at him with those blue eyes… and Sunny would feel SOMETHING's gaze piercing into him just as terribly.

Every second he spent with Basil's concern and care was pure torture, even if he still wanted it. Even if it was what he wanted more than anything, it was also something he would never be able to let himself accept. A warmth that was ceaselessly desired… but would only ever continue to burn him.

Accepting that warmth would mean accepting himself and what he did to her. Accepting that she was never coming back. That none of it was a bad dream he could ever get away from.

It would mean accepting that in spite of what he had done, he was still deserving of a chance to move on from it. To move on from killing his sister.

Sunny couldn't accept that. He could try, but he wouldn't. That burning wellspring of self-hatred would never run out. He would despise himself over and over until the moment he finally ceased waking up again.

He hated that Basil had forgiven him. That Basil still cared about him at all. That Basil thought making a promise to "stay together" with someone like Sunny was somehow noble or desirable. He despised that Basil had suggested it was okay for them to still draw comfort from each other's company, even after what nightmares they had enacted.

*Didn't he care, back then? Didn't he see that what Sunny had done was unforgivable?*

Basil kept knocking and Sunny kept sleeping. He knew his friend's efforts would have to stop eventually, and eventually they did.

Sunny was alone then. He didn't have to go outside anymore. There was only one person left he had to speak to, but his mother never mentioned anything discomforting to him, not really. She couldn't bear to acknowledge any of it either. The pitiful silence of that house enveloped them both.

The first few months after cutting Basil out were the worst, but it wasn't long after that the fog started to set in. The infinite emptiness of white space began to stretch throughout his mind, even while awake. A shadowy lightbulb formed, like a cocoon around an uncontrollable evil… and Sunny began to forget. Forget that any of it happened. Push the horror so deep within himself that not even his own mind could access it any longer.

It was easier than expected. Its like it was some kind of safeguard that his brain already possessed. To break part of himself off and store it so far away that maybe he would never see it again. A protective mechanism designed for the sole purpose of guaranteeing one's own survival.

The emptiness spreads like a disease, but it could never spread far enough. Never far enough to conceal everything. It wasn't true nothingness after all, but simply a coat of white paint that had been slapped over an endless blackness.

The world inside his head becomes reality, because that world is one which could be reset. No matter how many mistakes he made, Sunny could undo them. No matter how many times Basil found the truth, Sunny could destroy it.

It would have been all too easy to let the boy with red eyes find the truth and simply disappear from his dreamscape, but Sunny could never accept it that way. Even if he still had his other friends, Sunny's perfect world wasn't perfect without Basil.

And so, no matter how many times his friend found that truth and was excluded from Headspace, Sunny would search for him. He would dig into those deep horrors once again, and fight desperately for yet another Basil to take the place of the previous. A Basil that didn't yet know of the truth hidden beneath his dreams, and hopefully never would.

Sunny would keep repeating this cycle, over and over, until he could have both… and KEEP both.

But yet despite his tireless efforts, Basil's folly always persisted. The perfect nights were short. Most of those long-extended dreams were spent in constant search and constant struggle. Basil was missing far more often than not.

The longer those long cycles persisted, the more that Basil seemed to seep into the very fabric of his dream world. Shadowy abominations speaking his tired words and broken apologies began to compose themselves even in the most innocuous places within Headspace.

With every Basil that finds the truth, Sunny must obtain another. With every Basil obtained, the truth grows back once more. With every refused truth, the shadows grow more persistent than before.

*More and more doors in the darkness. More and more bad dreams. More and more dead friends. Baseball bats and elevator shafts. Broken watermelons and spider nests.*

But those were just dreams. In reality, Basil had been alone in his own home. Basil was tending to his garden with scraped hands, trying to focus on anything other than the cowardly thoughts that swarmed inside his head.

While Sunny ran around his dreamscape looking for a missing friend with blue-green hair, the one he was desperately attempting to replace lingered silently in that house across the street, hoping one day that he would wake up again.

Sunny watched the blonde on the other side of the room quietly play with his fingers while his pale blue eyes drifted somberly across a palace of garbage.

*He can't afford to lose Basil this time.*

# House Rules

Chapter Notes

> Long time no upload. I almost can't believe how long its been. The story is technically still being updated every day, but I don't want to start releasing the final act of the original draft until the entire thing is definitively written.

> *This is a brief chapter that was supposed to have been uploaded a long time ago, but never was for various reasons. Hope you have a great day.*

A boy with black hair stares absentmindedly at a small wall shelf that had been erected between the kitchen and the living room of his family home. A couple of his friends are discussing a comic beside him, but Sunny is momentarily transfixed by the second slab of wood which now hung over that tiny passageway. Until this moment, he hadn't even taken note of the shelf's sudden appearance. For all he knew, it could have been hanging on that wall for ages before he had even realized it was there.

There's nothing particularly noteworthy about this random shelf, but it was indicative of a pervasive trend that had infected his home in recent days.

*It all started just outside the closet.*

Sunny's mother had purchased a somewhat small, decorative bookcase that had been propped up against the previously-empty span of wall that stood across from the stairwell closet. She had recently rediscovered an assortment of old pottery that had been living untouched in that same closet, and she wanted to set up a place to properly display those peculiar items before she forgot about them again.

Sunny thought it was a bit ironic that his mother was making such a fuss over her new display area when those same decorative pots, plates and figures had technically only moved a few feet from where they had originally been hidden.

Recently, his mom had been getting more and more into the idea of 'reinventing' the furniture in the house, as she described it. Sunny wasn't exactly sure what that meant, but from what he could tell, it mostly amounted to the couch and television being slightly reoriented every other month, as well as an increasing quantity of pictures and shelves randomly populating any remaining empty walls such that it appeared as if their home was being threatened by an invasive species of sentient decorative displays. Sometimes it would take him a week or so to even notice, but whenever he thought his mother was finally finished, a new shelf would materialize from the shadowy depths of Fix-It and populate his home, lying in wait for his

eventual attention. Sunny never really noticed how much weird stuff they had until those items started hopping onto the walls.

His mother had somehow gotten Mari into it as well. The two were becoming a pair of decorative menaces. Now his mom and sister were both talking about 'reinventing' the sibling's shared bedroom as well. Sunny shuddered. He cringed at the idea of sitting up in the middle of the night and knocking the tip of his skull into yet another shelf of knick-knacks that had randomly generated above him while he slept.

The weirdest shelf by far, however, was the one that Sunny's mom had insisted their father install above the new bookcase. On it had been placed a variety of old books from the closet that Sunny highly doubted his parents had ever actually read.

Sunny found it a little strange that the pottery was being stored in the bookcase and the **books** were being stored on the shelf, but he was not an interior designer. All of this new stuff went both literally and figuratively over his head.

The boy finally broke his gaze with what he felt must have been at least the fifth shelf to generate from their walls in the last month and turned his attention back to his friends.

It is a Saturday afternoon, and Sunny had been left alone in their house with Basil. Earlier that morning, their friends had all gathered to watch cartoons together in the living room (as was the typical highlight of Sunny's week) but everyone else had left a few hours ago, each having some kind of prior engagement today, Mari and their parents included. Everyone else was gone.

*Well, everyone else except Aubrey.*

But... that technically wasn't supposed to happen. Aubrey was unfortunately not allowed to continue playing with Sunny and Basil now that everyone else was out of the picture.

This was because Sunny's parents had a weird rule about Sunny hanging around with his friends when neither them or Mari were alongside him: he could be left alone with Basil, Kel, Hero.... *but **never** with Aubrey.*

Sunny didn't really understand why that was the case. Did they think that Aubrey was somehow less trustworthy than his other friends? Had Aubrey done something wrong? Did they think he was going to get in trouble if just him and Aubrey were left alone? That didn't sound right. Sunny didn't really see any reason for his parents to think the way they did.

When it came to doing damage to their house, Kel was clearly the most common threat. Sunny thought back to the stray basketball that had left a still-lingering crack in their glass sliding door. Sunny thought it was only supposed to be baseballs and golfballs that assaulted people's homes like that. Hero had dragged Kel by his ear to apologize to Sunny's parents, but Sunny himself still didn't understand how the projectile had landed that way in the first place. Kel wasn't even in their yard at the time.

Kel was an unstoppable force. If something was breakable, he would somehow find a way to break it.

Aubrey wasn't anything like that, though. Her overzealous smile sometimes made her look as if she might break in through your windows but its not like she actually would. Aubrey was very polite and well-behaved around their parents, which Sunny always assumed she had picked up from his sister.

The two seemed to take some sort of mutual pride in their attempts to appear elegant and refined, even though Sunny found it kind of weird sometimes. It was probably all the tea parties and princess movies that had gone straight to their heads.

They were probably just trying to show off how 'cool' and 'mature' they could be compared to the boys. Mari could pull off the upper-class act for a while, but she would always end up cracking a bad joke eventually and ruining the effect. Sunny was somewhat surprised how good Aubrey was at that same act, but then Kel would piss her off somehow and the illusion would similarly end up fizzling into thin air.

Sunny thought that maybe they should try to get Basil in on their 'elegant' roleplay. As meek and well-mannered as he was, the gardener would likely outshine them both. He wasn't a very good actor, though.

Regardless, Sunny's parents had no reason to distrust Aubrey. Her behavior around them was nothing short of excessive courtesy.

One could even argue that Aubrey had a better 'good kid' track record with their household than Sunny himself. So why wasn't Aubrey allowed to stay in their home without supervision? Sunny just couldn't find the negative difference between his other friends and her.

*Was it just because she was a **girl**? Why did that matter?*

That's what Mari had told him, but it sounded so stupid that Sunny had assumed she had probably just been messing with him. Mari was a girl and Sunny was left alone with her literally all the time. His parents *always* left Mari in charge.

Sunny couldn't help but be left scratching his head. What a pointless, stupid rule.

It was his parent's anniversary today, and so they'd left to go fulfill a prior dinner reservation somewhere outside of town. They had both seemingly been in such a rush out the door after Mari left that they had not taken note of the fact that the highly-uncommon astral event which they so frequently forbid had finally taken place: *Aubrey was still in their house without any 'adult' supervision around, Mari or otherwise.*

It was just Sunny, Aubrey, and Basil alone.

Sunny felt a bit confused. Was his parent's dumb rule something that needed to be taken seriously or not? Neither of Sunny's friends seemed to notice or care.

Well, if nobody had commented on it it likely was not something to worry about. Aubrey would definitely end up going home before Sunny's parents came back later that night, and it wasn't as if Mari was going to snitch on them if she popped through the door an hour or two

early. Sunny quickly stopped even registering that the rule was being broken at all, and returned to what he had been reading previously.

The trio continued joking around and reading comics on the living room floor for a while longer before Basil eventually cleared his throat and said something that confused Sunny all over again. To Sunny's intense annoyance, **Basil** was actually the one who pointed out the fact that the *no-aubrey-when-unsupervised* rule was being broken right now. He interrupted their fun exclusively to underline that Sunny's parents would not approve of the current setup. Aubrey then realized that was indeed the case and Sunny watched as her face fell in disappointment.

The boy's mouth dropped open slightly in disbelief. Sunny knew that Basil could sometimes be a bit of a conformist (so to speak), but he still thought it was more than a little obnoxious and unnecessary that **he** was the one insisting Aubrey had to go if no one else was here to complain about it. Its not like anyone would have known if Aubrey had just stuck around a little longer. *Basil really needed to stop being like that.*

"I just wouldn't want you to get in trouble, you know?" Basil suggested in a somewhat-somber-sounding tone, but Sunny noted that he was wearing a slight smile on his face as the phrase left his lips.

*Why was Basil smiling while he said that? This was really strange of him.*

"I mean, I think if they really cared my parents would have said something themselves." Sunny argued in favor of Aubrey sticking around, irritated that Basil was even bringing this up. Aubrey quietly sighed, the joyful energy from before having been squeezed out of her.

"No, Basil is right. My dad gets annoying if I stay out too late with everyone. I should head home before it gets dark." She stated.

"Oh, okay. See you later, then." Sunny said his goodbyes. *Thanks a lot, Basil. Very cool.*

"Bye!" Aubrey slung her backpack over her shoulder and waved to them before she backed out the front door. The two boys gestured farewell in unison. "Bye." "Bye!"

The living room returns to silence as both Sunny and Basil resume reading their respective comics, or at least appearing to do so. Sunny was still staring down at the page beneath him but he wasn't really reading any more. He was too annoyed. He almost acted on the urge he felt to ask Basil why he had said that to Aubrey when they were all just having fun, but he knew his friend probably believed he was genuinely doing the right thing by underlining their rule. Sunny sighed through his nose.

A few minutes passed by uneventfully. Sunny kept attempting to get reinvested in the Spaceboy plotline he had been following earlier when Basil suddenly walked off to use the bathroom.

Sunny hoped his friend wouldn't notice, but the other boy turned his head and watched as Basil quietly crept from the living room. The black-haired spy lightly scratched at the side of his face.

He had begun to experience a persistent, gnawing discomfort in the back of his mind. A tiny, shameful fear that distracted him from his previous relaxation.

Sunny was slightly annoyed at himself for this feeling considering that he was still a bit irritated at Basil for his friend's behavior earlier, but deep down he had to admit to himself that since Aubrey had now left, Sunny was a bit anxious that Basil was also going to soon announce his departure. As far as he was aware, Mari was not due to return for a long while, and Sunny didn't like the idea of being left completely isolated, even if he still technically had Mewo watching over him.

Out of the two of them, Basil had always been more anxious and easily-frightened, but this was one situation in which the tables were turned. Sunny really didn't want Basil to leave now... *but he also somewhat-shamefully hoped his friend didn't know that.*

He knew there was no way the blonde would ever make fun of him for it, but he still couldn't help but desire that Basil would be left unaware of how disturbed Sunny sometimes became when left entirely alone. He thought maybe Basil would find him kind of stupid for it.

After all, it was probably a bit pathetic considering Sunny was almost in his teens now and he still felt this way.

...

Still, out of all his friends, Basil was the most easily-suggestible. Sunny could probably twist his arm into sticking around a little longer, somehow. He just needed an excuse.

Sunny absentmindedly tapped at the side of his skull while he waited for Basil's eventual return from the bathroom. He walked into the kitchen for a moment and poked around in their fridge during his friend's absence. It was bit past dinnertime now, so Sunny thought that if he suggested him and Basil find something to eat then Saturday hangout time would be extended a little longer, even if Basil had already been over at their house basically all day long.

He took note of the leftover spaghetti that was available and returned to his same spot on the floor, as if trying to conceal the fact that he had moved, even though that was pointless and stupid, wasn't it? Its not like Basil would have known Sunny was plotting something if he saw his friend just now, but Sunny still snuck around like a criminal, his actions influenced by an underlying embarrassment.

The black-haired sneak felt a bit odd now. Basil was really taking a long time in the bathroom. *Was he okay?*

The door upstairs finally opened and Sunny listened to the sounds of Basil's footsteps as he descended the staircase. Sunny continued looking down at the comic under his nose and pretended to read it. He watched Basil's shadow pass over him as the blonde walked back into the living room. After another short moment of silence, something rather unexpected happens.

To Sunny's surprise, Basil does not return to his spot on the floor across from the other boy. Rather, he picks up his own comic and then promptly lays himself down right by Sunny's side, so close that their arms were now touching. Sunny almost asked Basil what he was doing, but then he realized that would have probably been a weird thing to ask. It wasn't as if they had never been in this precise position before. It just wasn't exactly like Basil to suddenly rub up against him like that.

*Basil himself did not draw any attention to it either, because that was just the way they were around each other, right? It was, wasn't it?* Best friends were just like that.

It didn't seem as if Basil had any intention of leaving anytime soon, which should have relaxed Sunny, but for whatever reason he feels his heartbeat actually increase. *Why was he so nervous now? Sunny felt the need to ask Basil why he had relocated himself but couldn't make the words leave his throat.*

Basil began asking Sunny some brief questions about the comic he had borrowed now that they sat close enough together for him to point out the individual things he was referring to, and Sunny's anxiety and anger from earlier started to fade away. He slowly began to relax a little, but for whatever reason, every time Basil's arm rubbed up against his again, Sunny felt himself losing focus on what his friend was saying. *Why did Basil have to keep moving around like that?*

Sunny felt his heartbeat start to flutter around once more. It kind of hurt. Was there something wrong with him?

Sunny began to think that Basil also seemed a bit nervous about something, but he wasn't entirely sure if he was just imagining that or not. The pair didn't look each other directly in the face too often, but on the few occasions in which Sunny glanced at his expression, he could have sworn Basil's face had turned a bit red, and that his breathing was kind of heavy. Was his friend getting sick? Was that why he spent so long in the bathroom?

*Something about the other boy's hair seemed kind of different now, but Sunny couldn't quite put his finger on what.*

Whenever Basil flipped a page, Sunny could have sworn his hands were very slightly shaking. Sunny almost reached out and grabbed one just to confirm if that was indeed the case. If Basil wasn't feeling well, maybe he should go home after all... *even if Sunny would hate it.*

Sunny had learned quite a while back that Basil was not often vocal about whether or not he was experiencing some kind of discomfort. Sunny didn't exactly have much natural aptitude when it came to picking up on that kind of thing, but he noticed it with Basil because Mari was the same way.

Sunny was technically the youngest (and thus the one who was babied the most often) but he wondered if now was one of the rare times where he needed to step up and take care of Basil since the blonde would often disregard his own condition... like when he worked in the garden for too long and showed up at their house the next day with band-aids all over his hands. Sunny never understood why he wouldn't just stop before he ended up like that.

"Are you okay?"

"W-What?" Basil responded, stuttering slightly.

"Your hands are shaking a little and your voice sounds kind of weird."

"Ah!" Basil exclaimed. "Uh- I had a little bit too much tea this morning, haha. I get the jitters really easily."

"Oh." Sunny replied. *It was getting close to sundown now, though.*

"I also had one of Kel's sodas from the fridge earlier!" Basil awkwardly rushed out his second claim.

There was a two-second gap of uninterrupted silence before Basil continued talking, but those two seconds felt like an eternity. Sunny almost wished he hadn't even asked.

"Your family sure put up a lot of cool stuff on the walls now, haha." Basil laughed again, suddenly taking a random interest in the objects Sunny had been distracted by earlier.

"Until mom gets sick of it and changes it all again." Sunny sardonically grumbled in response.

"Hehe..." The blonde replied.

...

"I noticed you guys got a new bookshelf. Looks... cool." Basil stated with an almost unbelievable air of awkwardness.

Sunny felt as though he was mostly immune to Basil's occasional social dysfunctions but even he had to acknowledge how out-of-control this scenario was getting. He needed to correct the direction of this conversation, somehow. Sunny usually relied on his friends to keep a conversation with Basil from meandering aimlessly, but he couldn't pass the ball to anyone else when the two of them were alone together.

*Now Basil was talking about the stupid bookshelf too. Was this evidence that the two of them were becoming adults? That they were starting to have casual discussions about furniture?*

Sometimes it felt like the older the two of them got, the more difficult it became to talk to one another in private. Sunny didn't understand why that was the case. Even though they were inarguably closer now than they'd ever been, Sunny somehow felt far more self-conscious around Basil now than when they were younger. Its like he was moving backwards. There was clearly something wrong with him.

*Sunny felt weird. Basil was acting weird. This living room was getting increasingly weird from the weird thoughts brought on by all this weirdness.*

"I just don't understand why the *shelf* shelf has the books and the **book**shelf has the other stuff." Sunny stated with a furrowed brow, amazed that he was somehow now involved in a

conversation about his mother's stupid bookcase but incapable of letting what Basil had said lead straight into another awkward silence.

"I'm s-sure that there's a reason for that." Basil smiled. "Even if I'm not really sure what it would be, haha."

***Laughing***. Why did Basil keep laughing like that? It sounded even more forced than usual. Sunny could understand if Basil felt the need to fake a laugh in response to Mari's painful dad jokes or Kel's awkward, intrusive nosiness, but the fact that Sunny was getting the 'fake laugh' treatment just as much today was kind of depressing him.

*Was Basil really that uncomfortable when the two of them were alone? Why? Had Sunny done something wrong? If so, then why had the other boy even stuck around this long?*

"There was a book up on that shelf that I thought looked kind of interesting, but I can't reach that high. I wonder if your mom would mind if I asked to borrow it next time I'm over..." Basil professed an interest in one of his mother's books.

"Really? Which book is it?" Sunny inquired, immediately standing up to check out the object of interest that Basil was referring to.

"Oh, it's nothing you'd like, Sunny." Basil dismissed. "Just y'know, dumb plant stuff." The blonde seemed to get a bit agitated at Sunny's sudden involvement. Sunny frowned slightly.

Why did Basil always do that? He always put down the things he was interested in. Basil liked plants, didn't he? So why was he always acting like that was stupid? Did he really think it was dumb to like plants? It's not like it was even half as dumb as being enthusiastic about *shelving* like his mom and sister.

"Maybe I can help you get it down." Sunny stated, stepping into the lower walkway and glancing up at the hovering shelf that loomed over the bookcase. Sunny scanned his eyes over the selection of hardcovers. They all did look pretty boring to him. He had no clue which one Basil was talking about until his gaze reached the end of the list, after which the answer was obvious.

It was an encyclopedia of herbal medicine, the cover was a dull shade of green, and judging by the state of its binding... it seemed to be quite old.

In this moment, Sunny felt a bit stupid. That book was clearly something Basil would have definitely been into, and Sunny had not even been aware of its existence. Basil was always showing off and introducing new books to him, and this would have been an opportunity for Sunny to have done the same in return... *had he actually been paying attention.*

It wasn't as if it was his book to show off, but it must have been sitting up on that shelf for days. He could have been the one to point it out, but it was almost as if he was never paying attention to the world around him, especially lately. Maybe that's why Basil was acting so weird when they were alone.

Basil also stood up and hurriedly walked into the other room after his friend. "Thanks Sunny, but it can wait for another time!" The blonde stated, staring up at the object in question. "Sometimes stinks that neither of us is as tall as Hero, huh? Haha..."

Basil lightly grabbed at the hem of Sunny's shirt as if he was now embarrassed that his friend was trying to get the book down. Sunny frowned.

*Why was Basil acting embarrassed? Did the think it was weird for Sunny to be offering him help with this? Basil was always offering Sunny help with basically everything, so why could Sunny never do the same? Was there an unspoken rule he was somehow breaking?*

Sunny was getting increasingly annoyed again.

"You don't need to be tall to grab it." Sunny stated plainly. "You just need to do this-"

The boy raised his left foot and put it on the first level of the decorative bookcase.

"Uhh... Sunny I **really** don't think you should be doing that..." Basil started mildly panicking behind him, sweat building on his forehead. "You're going to slip!"

Sunny suppressed the urge to roll his eyes as he reached his arm out towards the side of the green book. He barely needed to get any higher off the ground to grab it, but Basil continued acting like he was about to fall from the top of Mount Everest. Sunny wasn't much of a rebel himself, but Basil could really benefit from learning to not take every single house rule so seriously.

The boy stretched himself upward with great effort. To Sunny's continued frustration, the book now lingered mere centimeters from his hand, but he could not grab it without taking another step. Sunny raised his foot and moved up the bookcase one more level before picking at the side of the book with his fingers. It was a bit stuck in between the other titles, but Sunny pulled hard enough that the book slid free. Sunny smirked at his own success before promptly placing the book under his arm and lightly hopping back to the floor.

"See, Basil?" He stated. "Easy."

"S-S-S-S-SUNNY-" Basil struggled, gesturing wildly to something behind him. Sunny turned back around.

Mom's decorative jade plate that she had received as a gift from their grandmother was wobbling violently back and forth on the shelf that Sunny's feet had just been planted on. The black-haired mountain climber watched with wide eyes as the object slowly jittered towards the edge of the shelf. Sunny was immediately petrified.

***It was going to fall-***

The plate stopped vibrating, and the shelf settled down once more. The potential oncoming disaster quickly faded away into a mere historical footnote. That was way too close.

Basil loudly exhaled in relief as if he just spat up the entire contents of both his lungs at once.

"Well, at least nothing bad actually happen-"

Basil spoke too soon. For some accursed, unholy reason, the leftmost metal handle of that unfortunate shelf which had been screwed into the wall (and was now supporting the somewhat-heavy arrangement of books) suddenly popped off from its place of rest. Now lacking one of its critical supports, the entire left side of the display shelf dramatically tilted downward, the violent shift in angle causing every book remaining on the plank to slide down and loudly crash onto the top of the bookcase below. Everything within the bookcase jittered slightly in response to the flurry of blows.

Had the jade plate not wobbled towards the edge of the shelf after Sunny had jumped down from it, the multi-hit strike provided by those hardback novels would have likely done nothing to dislodge it from its home, but unfortunately the (rather dense) collection of classic poetry which fell at the very end was one impact too many.

The plate jiggled to the edge of the bookcase and fell to the floor, shattering on the ground next to Sunny's foot in a surprisingly quiet manner compared to everything else that had just tumbled apart in an instant.

Oops.

*Well that sucks.* Sunny sighed in preemptive regret over the handheld gaming console he would not get to see again for a week at least. Maybe mom would be more lenient if Sunny said he was just trying to get a book down for his friend. Would the fact that it happened on his parent's anniversary make it *more* forgivable or *less* forgivable that he had broken this? Why had the wooden shelf even popped off like that to begin with? That was a dirty trick.

Sunny continued trying to calculate exactly how much trouble he was in while his friend began breaking down as if he were mirroring the plate in question.

*"Oh no. Oh no! Nonononono-."* Basil stuttered in very-visible distress. He held his panicked hands out over the ceramic shards as if there was still some faint hope of him quickly slapping all the pieces into a refabricated form before the pair had to face reality.

"M-Maybe we can say that Mewo did it on accident?" Basil suggested. "D-Do you think Mewo could jump that high?" The blonde nervously pulled at his own hair. His eyes were wide and his voice trembled. "Why did it s-suddenly fall off like that??"

Basil kept rambling on and on in a state of excessive fear, but if his friend was completely honest, Sunny was actually having a fairly hard time paying any real attention to what the other boy was saying. He was too busy staring in shock at the expression on the blonde's face. Basil looked genuinely terrified.

*Why did Basil look like that? It was kind of scary. Cut that out...*

It was just a plate, wasn't it? It really wasn't that big a deal, right?

Sunny wanted to let those reassuring words escape from his throat but he was momentarily frozen in place again, having been petrified by the sudden, extreme escalation in his friend's

distressing behavior. Why was Basil freaking out this much? It was Sunny's fault the plate was broken. He hadn't done anything wrong at all. It's wasn't like Basil was going to get punished for what Sunny did.

"It really isn't that bad, is it?" Sunny finally spoke, interrupting Basil's rambling. "It's like Mari always says, *accidents happen."*

Sunny let himself smirk slightly. Heh. Basil was being a bit silly right now, wasn't h-

"**WHAT?**" Basil objected, eyes wide. "Sunny, stop messing around!"

The black-haired criminal flinched slightly as Basil raised his voice at him, feeling his heartbeat continue building in response to the blonde's unhinged panic. Sunny reached out his hand to try and calm his friend down, but ended up recoiling it instead, afraid of somehow escalating the situation even more.

Basil suddenly turned away from the plate shards again and stared Sunny dead in the eyes. His panicked voice took on a slightly-more definitive tone. "L-Listen to me, Sunny. I was the one who broke this, okay? When someone asks us what happened, you need to say it was me."

Sunny's eyes immediately narrowed in confusion. ***What?***

"Why?"

Suddenly (to Sunny's immense relief) a sound could be heard at the front door. Someone is twisting the lock. Mari must have come home early.

Mari would definitely end up scolding him for this, but Sunny knew he more or less deserved it this time. The punishment he would be given was a punishment he had coming. What mattered was that she would be able to calm Basil down. Mari to get him to stop freaking out, and then maybe she'd help Sunny explain to their parents that it was just an accident.

That was just the way she was. Mari could calm down anyone. *Except Kel, maybe.*

Basil’s eyes widened at the sound of the door opening. He seemed far less enthusiastic about a potential visitor walking in on this. All color immediately drained out of the gardener’s face.

Sunny tried not to let his friend’s outburst of fear scare him out of admitting what he did. He turned away from Basil and stepped back into the living room so that Mari wouldn’t immediately walk in on the two of them overlooking the scene of the crime.

The door swung open. Sunny tried to run through a quick explanation in his head to fill Mari in on-

*Not Mari. It was dad. Something must have happened while his parents were out.*

Sunny’s father stepped through the door for only a split second before pausing when he noticed his son awkwardly staring at him from the stairwell entrance. Sunny's dad smirked.

“Hey. I forgot something I wanted to give your mother, so I had to come back…”

Sunny felt a bead of sweat appear on his forehead. Game over.

“You uh… good there, Sunny?” His father asked, seemingly taking note of the boy's rather awkward position. Sunny swallowed and shook his head.

---

Sunny and Basil stood side-by-side at the scene of the crime after having revealed the issue at hand to their prosecutor.

Sunny’s dad sighed and scratched his stubble with a discomforted look on his face, pausing momentarily before making a response. He seemed to also be attempting to calculate how much trouble they were supposed to be in. Dad likely didn’t care much about the plate himself, but both him and Sunny knew that Mom definitely did. It was not the best day for something like this, either.

Sunny was struggling to think of something he could say in his defense that would improve the current situation, but he was far too distracted by Basil to manage even a single word. Basil looked absolutely petrified.

“So which one of you broke it?” His father inquired.

“**I did**.” Both boys spoke in unison. Basil immediately turned to look at Sunny with unnerving speed, mouth agape as if his friend had just slapped him or spat in his face. Sunny only glanced at the blonde for a moment before looking away again, his own expression now visibly confused by his friend’s bizarre falsification.

Dad raised a brow but said nothing. “Okay. So what happened?”

Sunny held out the encyclopedia. “Basil said he wanted to see this book so-“

*“Suh-“* Basil choked out the first segment of his friend’s name, in a clear attempt to get him to stop talking.

“-I was trying to get it from the shelf but the hinge snapped away and all the books… fell down?” Sunny finished. His statement ended up sounding more like a question as he continued growing increasingly puzzled by his friend’s desperate attempt to silence him. Basil looked like he was about to pass out.

“…and then the falling shelf knocked the plate off.” Sunny finished, only then realizing the full extent of his own bad luck after presenting his almost-humorous summarization.

*This was the stupid shelf’s fault. He knew that they couldn’t be trusted.*

“I see.” Sunny’s father scratched at the stubble on the side of his face again.

Dad looked hilariously awkward in this setup. Sunny's father was rather strict by nature, but he wasn't typically the one dealing out punishments. That was Mom's job. He looked almost as if he was trying very hard to care at all.

And in the end, he didn't seem to manage it. Dad finally cracked a smirk and began picking up the plate fragments himself, likely believing that if he left such a task to kids that the two of them would end up cutting their hands open on the numerous green shards.

"You two are getting me into hot water with my wife on my fifteenth anniversary for Christ's sake!" Sunny's dad joked as he placed the plate fragments back on the shelf to be addressed later. "There's a stepstool in the closet right behind you, by the way. Consider trying that out next time, will you?"

Mr. Suzuki chuckled and informed Sunny that he would talk about this with his mother later. Sunny internally sighed and experienced a mild wave of dread, but he was at least glad that his father didn't seem particularly upset with him or Basil.

Sunny's father quickly walked away and stepped out the front door again after grabbing something that had seemingly been tucked away under the couch. He gave a short wave and then swiftly locked the door once more. Dad was too busy to stick around and continue dealing with all of this at the moment.

Sunny smirked. That didn't play out nearly as badly as he expected it would. He turned back around to face Basil.

"See, there was nothing to worry ab-"

"**W-What the heck S-Sunny!!! What is w-wrong with you??**"

…

*Uh?*

Sunny was instantly taken aback by Basil's sudden outburst as the other boy hissed at him. He had never heard Basil sound anything like that before. What was he getting so upset for?

"W-Why didn't you listen to me?? I told you to say that I broke it, didn't I?" Basil spat.

"I… what?" Sunny failed to form a coherent response, having been caught off-guard by Basil's continued emotional escalation.

"Do you have any idea how bad that could have been??!"

*Bad? It could have been bad? Bad how?*

"When you do stuff like that your p-parents can just get rid of you! You do know that, right?"

They could? Sunny seriously doubted that was true. Besides, his parents wouldn't hate him over a broken plate, right?

**This is weird. Really weird. Basil is being weird.**

"Even if your parents hated me, we'd still be able to see each other at school... but if they got rid of you and you were taken away by some other family then I'd *never* be able to see you again, Sunny! *Never!"*

"Oh." Sunny replied, too confused to muster the courage to tell Basil that what he just said didn't make any sense to him.

Basil seemed completely blown away by Sunny's limp response. "Why don't you care at all? That's so mean! What did I ever do to you?!"

"Stop yelling, please. You're being loud." Sunny flinched once again, wincing in response to the unstable tone of Basil's voice. Basil stared at him.

*Sunny is confused. Basil is too loud. What his friend was talking about was just a bunch of weird and scary nonsense. Stuff like that didn't actually happen.*

"None of that happened." Sunny stated, incapable of coming up with anything else to dispel Basil's horror. The other boy just continued staring at him.

"So, um... here's your book." Sunny casually held out the herbal encyclopedia Basil had been wanting to see. Sunny's friend did not take it.

*"Do you want... to eat dinner... instead?"* Sunny shot the one shot he had. His mouth was dry. He just wanted to do something else so Basil would stop feeling like this. So he would go back to normal.

Basil didn't say any more. He just glared at Sunny with tears in his eyes. He seemingly tried to speak once more but only managed to let out a pathetic whimper. The blonde immediately wiped his eyes with his sleeve in embarrassment and then dashed away, quickly running to the front door and tearing it open, leaving his best friend behind.

The door drifted back until it closed on its own following Basil's hasty exit. Sunny was alone now. He continued awkwardly holding out the book that his friend desired but there was no longer anyone around to take it from him. Mewo stared curiously at him from the back of the couch, seemingly trying to figure out exactly what he was trying to do right now.

*We have leftover spaghetti.* Sunny thought to himself, no audience remaining to hear his pathetic sales pitch.

The house was unusually quiet now. No one was watching cartoons or flipping the pages of comic books anymore. This had been such a fun day, until just a moment ago. Now it had all been replaced with a dreadful, empty silence.

Sunny took a seat on the floor and stared down at the book he was holding. *Why couldn't he listen? Sunny told him it wasn't that big a deal, didn't he? Basil should have trusted him.*

...

The boy suddenly experiences an intolerable swelling of anger in his chest. He flings the herbal encyclopedia across the room. It slams into the wall by the sliding door with considerable force, before immediately coming back down again and landing directly in Sunny's own backpack which had been left open on the floor. Mewo immediately dashed out of the room in obvious fear of the tiny human's sudden madness.

Mewo's instantaneous panic makes Sunny feel an immediate wave of intense guilt. *Why did he do that?*

Sunny stands up and slowly walks towards his backpack in shame. He retrieves the encyclopedia from his bag and brushes it off. *Sorry, book. Sorry, Mewo.*

*Sunny glances up at the wall. There's a scratch in the paint now... but its so small it could take ages before anyone realizes its there.*

# Onwards Without You

Chapter Notes

> Alright, it's time to get this shitshow back on the road. Omori's birthday is coming up (step aside, Jesus) so what better time to finally start uploading new (old) content.
>
> I'm not going to make the same mistake as last time and suggest any specific schedule, but this fic should once again update relatively frequently up into either February or March of next year. Or, to put it into numeric terms, I will halt at about the 280k-300k word mark.
>
> (This story is going to be the death of me. Hope you don't mind side characters, because it'll be a bit before we see the hospital boys again.)

*All things considered, Hero and his friends had concluded their beach trip fairly quickly. After lunch, the remainder of the day was spent driving around a few other random locations that held some kind of significance to his old social circle. Parks and theatres and stores and malls, each carrying some small fragment of their lost innocence. A tiny part of Hero was grateful to have been able to revisit some of these places with a few of his childhood companions, but he largely just felt tortured by all of it. With every subsequent memory revisited, she grew back inside his head even more prominently than before. Everything reminded him of Mari, and that was somehow even more painful than he imagined it would be.*

Despite how much Hero tried, he couldn't shake the feeling that if he turned around just one more time that she would somehow be there, smiling alongside him. He felt as if it wasn't just the three of them, but that somehow... *she might have been following along too. Maybe he was finally losing his mind.*

Hero wanted to scream into the air a vast proclamation of just how deeply, terribly sorry he was about everything. He wanted to shout into the heavens how desperate he was to see her again... but he knew he wouldn't. He couldn't. Even if Hero completely fell apart now, she would never be there to say anything back to him. Mari would live on forever inside his head, but that also meant she was forever outside his grasp.

*Unless he made a path into his own skull. Maybe then he could pull her out.*

...

The air between Hero, his brother, and Aubrey had been surprisingly light considering the circumstances, but Hero assumed that was itself evidence that they were each struggling. All of them were attempting to present a version of themselves that they weren't anymore, and

would likely never be again. It almost felt nice to pretend they were the exact same kids they used to be... but that would never be true again. Even if hints of them lingered on, those kid were buried together with Mari.

Hero wished the three of them could be nothing more than a group of old friends revisiting a world they had long since left behind, but the truth was far more sinister. This past life they'd shared and the person who invited them all into it had not been left behind, but stolen away. Mari had been taken by the very people Hero's friends now spent their time looking for in a pointless mock search that was swiftly going nowhere.

Hero wondered if Mari would be proud of them for sticking together, or sad for them since they had become so stuck in the past.

*Maybe both. Maybe neither. Maybe it didn't matter. Maybe if he told himself that enough times, he'd finally start to accept it.*

Hero felt increasingly confused by his own actions the longer this trip went on. He started to wonder what he would even say to Sunny or Basil if, in accordance with his ridiculous daydreams, they somehow randomly crossed paths on one of these meaningless vistas.

*Would he be happy to find them? Relieved? Would he get angry?*

*If Hero and his friends found them, what would they even say? That the pair should come back home? That Sunny and Basil still had the rest of their lives to look forward to? Was that even true? Could you really look forward to anything after doing what they had done?*

*Would such cheap platitudes and empty reassurances mean anything to them? To people who had done what they did? Was reassuring them even what Hero would want to do in the first place?*

*...*

*Did Hero even **want** them to still be... alive?*

*For what reason? Just to assuage his guilt? To obtain some kind of meaningless closure, or attempt to fix something that was clearly unfixable?*

*Did he want to punish them for running away from everything? For stealing her from everyone? What exactly would that punishment look like, and what difference would it make? Would he really feel better afterward?*

Hero almost laughed to himself. *Feel better*. When would any of it ever get any easier? He could scream into the sky all he wanted for the universe to give her back, but that massive, empty well of nothingness would never return a response. He wouldn't even receive a bitter refusal, just silent indifference.

Indifference to the fact that she had ever occupied this planet in the first place.

Hero wasn't a kid anymore. He was an adult, living his own life with his own problems. People all across this world inevitably lost people whom they'd loved all the time, and they would still continue to live on afterward. His situation wasn't special. Hero just had to find a way to do the same.

He knew he needed to be able to tell her goodbye, even if it seemed simply impossible for him no matter how much time had passed.

That's all he could hope to do. Learn to accept the unacceptable. *Accept that her and her brother had left everyone behind, that they were never coming back, and that there wasn't a single thing he could do about it.*

---

Hero and Kel said their goodbyes to Aubrey, parked Polly's car back in its original position, and walked home. It felt really strange, having gone to all those places and felt all those feelings... *only to return home and have no one else know they had even been outside Faraway.*

By the end of their day-long search the trio was already so close to Faraway again that it had been decided letting each of them go home simply made more sense than prolonging their getaway act for no real benefit. Having returned in this way, the three of them could continue the rest of their search tomorrow without any of their families even suspecting they had left town in the first place.

*Something about stepping back into his own house so soon felt kind of irritating to Hero, though. Returning home after a single day made it feel as if him and his friends had simply gone on some casual outing for their own amusement. That couldn't have been further from the truth.*

The young man tried not to spend the entire evening dwelling inside himself. Their mother was showering and getting ready for bed, so Hero spent some time in front of the television with his sister. The pair watched children's cartoons and puppet shows together... or at least attempted to. Sally was a bit too young to show any real interest in television.

But in spite of that, Hero couldn't help but think that she was already growing so much bigger, and much smarter. Time flew by fast.

Once his mother came back downstairs, Sally was returned into her arms so that bedtime could be initiated by a seasoned expert.

Hero's father asked him if he was soon going to sleep as well. The snores escaping from the sibling's bedroom door suggested that Kel had already crashed a while ago.

Hero said he wasn't quite ready to sleep yet. *Different sleep schedule,* he claimed. Hard to adjust back to the same hours as a normal human, after so much time spent in medical textbooks... or at least that was the excuse he used. His father simply nodded and wished him a good night.

...

Hero was still wide awake and it seemed rather nice outside, so he put his shoes back on and went for a walk towards the park. No reason to do so, but also no reason not to.

As he walked beside the familiar Faraway streetways he had grown up with, Hero stared up at the stars which silently glowed in the skies above his head. It had been a while since he had been able to see them, as their hometown had been bathed in dense clouds as of late. Looking into the air, Hero thought about how he used to feel a sense of wonder when he stared up at those same stars with her. He thought about how the entire universe had felt so impossibly full of beauty and color in those perfect moments.

Those feelings was long gone, now.

To the person he was now, those stars were meaningless. They had become nothing more than tiny pinpricks of light, quietly lingering trillions of miles away. Each one accomplishing nothing but existing, and despite their beauty, remaining just as irrelevant as everything else.

*Glowing onwards for no other reason than that was what stars did.*

# Orange Joe

*Kel took a deep breath, and silently readjusted the backpack he'd slung over his shoulder. His composure had felt a tad bit lacking for a while now, but ultimately everything was already planned out. The deck was stacked in his favor. He could do this.*

If he changed his mind about any of it, then he could just leave. Walk out silently and never come back again. He was the one who was entirely in control of this situation.

He doesn't have to ask the receptionist anything this time, because he already had his friend's rooms committed to memory. Kel calmly and confidently walks through the hall and up the stairwell by himself. He feels the hairs on his arms trying to stand up as he slowly ascends. The inside of the hospital is considerably colder than the world outside.

Kel reaches the end of the hall and silently creeps towards the doorway, hesitating slightly before he begins to step inside.

He catches a glimpse of Sunny lying in his hospital bed at the end of the room, surrounded by the flora which countless concerned townsfolk had left behind for him while he was unconscious. Despite having only been out of his house for a few days, Sunny seemed to have ensured that a lot of people in Faraway were going to really miss him.

...

*Kel wondered if he was going to be one of those people.*

The hospital is surprisingly quiet. Kel isn't really intending to sneak around, but he feels uncomfortable making his presence known, even if doing so was an inevitable part of this confrontation.

Kel silently steps forward through the doorway. Sunny hasn't noticed him yet. This was his last chance to call it quits. *Maybe he should just turn back?*

*Kel was just about to say something… something that would force Sunny to turn his head...*

But then he notices the look on the other boy's face and is instantly silenced again.

There's a potted plant in Sunny’s hands. He looks down at it as if inspecting the leaves for something which the rest of the world had missed. A bit strange by itself, but it was the expression which Sunny wore on his face which caught Kel completely off-guard.

To the other boy's surprise, Sunny wore a tiny smile under his tired eye. To Kel’s utter amazement, *Sunny was smiling.*

...

*What was it that he had to be so happy about?*

Kel stepped forward.

"Sunny.”

Sunny suddenly lifted his head... and then immediately jumped in his seat. The plant in his hands violently tilted and spilled over slightly onto his bedding, nearly toppling over completely before Sunny regained a grasp on it again. The younger boy froze completely, that soft smile on his face vanishing in an instant, quickly replaced by an expression of overwhelming, inescapable terror.

Kel’s heartbeat increased, his own body growing noticeably agitated by his friend's sudden distress.

"It's um, me. *Just me."* Kel glanced behind himself for a moment as if to emphasize that there was no one else coming.

Sunny said nothing, seemingly still petrified by the sudden surprise. He reached down and set the plant he was holding onto the floor beside his bed before turning back to face Kel with empty hands. Sunny’s arms visibly shook with either fear or anticipation.

"It... *I*..." Sunny appeared as if he was attempting to speak to his old friend but he failed miserably.

Kel steeled himself.

"How is your eye?"

"Oh, uh..." Sunny responded.

...

"Did they really... remove the whole thing?" Kel inquired.

...

Sunny’s face regained a minuscule fraction of composure. His expression turned from one of mild fright to something a bit more somber.

"Yeah." He confirmed. "It's gone."

...

"You sure… have a lot of plants in here." Kel thought aloud.

Sunny nodded slowly, visibly on-edge.

...

*"I want to talk."* Kel stated.

"Okay." Sunny confirmed.

“Are you?"

"What?"

"Are you really okay to talk right now?" Kel asked.

...

"Yes." Sunny confirmed.

...

Kel hesitates again.

…

"All that stuff you told us..."

Sunny’s fingernails dug into the blanket under his hands.

"..."

"All of that... really was the truth, right?"

...

"Yes." Sunny confirmed. *"That was the truth."*

Kel stared at Sunny’s face, unflinching. He picked away at the empty expression his old friend so frequently wore. Sunny seemingly couldn’t look directly back at him. The younger boy anxiously shuddered under his gaze.

Kel exhaled through his nose and finally broke the stare.

...

"But it was just a mistake." Kel stated, requesting his companion’s confirmation.

Sunny let out a shaky breath.

*"Yes."*

...

*An insect bounces against the hospital window, leaving behind the sound of a tiny impact against the glass. The birds outside are quiet, but still audible. A singular cloud passes listlessly overhead. It's a sunny summer day outside.*

"How did it happen?" Kel asked.

"...Exactly as I said before."

Kel shook his head. "No, I mean... how did it get that bad? For something like that to happen between the two of you?"

Sunny didn't respond. He trembled in response to the question, his pupil visibly shuddering as if searching in desperation for a satisfying response to give.

...

"Sorry." Kel apologized. "You don't have to answer. I didn't really mean to ask that, anyway."

Sunny nodded. Kel moved his own head down slightly to force the other boy's attention to remain squarely on him.

For a few moments, neither of them say anything. Kel and his friend sit together in silence... *sharing misery,* maybe. Taking the time that they need.

Kel finally breaks the silence, reaching into his back pocket and removing a piece of paper with a sequence of digits scribbled on it. He hands the paper to Sunny, who takes the item from him very slowly.

"I don't know if you still remember it, but... this is our number. Just, um… *so you don't forget."* Kel stated. "If I end up getting a cell phone eventually then I'll give you that instead."

Sunny's eye widened. He stared at the piece of paper in his hands as if it were about to evaporate right in front of him. For a moment, he said nothing.

...

"Why?" He inquired.

"Why, what?" Kel mirrored.

"Why are you giving me this?"

"Because we're friends." Kel stated. *"... I think."*

"Or at least... I don't want us to be... *not* friends." Kel summarized, struggling to express exactly what he meant.

Sunny nodded slowly, the beginnings of a lone tear visible in his remaining eye.

"How are... *Aubrey. Hero."* Kel's friend whispered, trembling slightly as the words were awkwardly squeezed out of his throat.

"They're doing about as well as you could expect." The taller boy summarized.

As Kel spoke, Sunny seemed to continually shrink smaller and smaller, as if his very existence in this hospital room was itself an unforgivable insult to the world around him.

...

Something about the other boy's pitiful state was kind of… *annoying.* But Kel couldn't deny that he still felt bad for him.

"I'll... put in a good word." Kel offered. "If you want me to."

Sunny froze again, not appearing to know how to react to that. He said nothing.

"Meeting with everyone again... spending the night in Basil's house..." Kel trailed off.

"I want that stuff to have meant something." He finished.

The smaller boy nodded slowly.

Sunny seemed to finally relax slightly. Lower his guard, maybe. The miserable frown on his face turned just slightly less hopeless, if only for a moment.

*But then that misery came right back again. Sunny's shoulders tensed. An old sense of fear slowly bubbled up in his eye once more.*

Sunny was going to say something. Ask something. Kel patiently waited for it.

...

"Did you speak to Basil?" He asked.

"No. I wanted to talk to you, first." Kel explained.

...

"Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't see Basil. *Please."* Sunny begged him.

Kel stared at his friend once more. Sunny sounded like he was pleading. Like he was desperate. It wasn't particularly difficult to understand why.

...

"That's not for you to decide." Kel replied, stone-faced.

"But it's... that…" Sunny trailed off.

"…"

"I just don't know if he'd really... be okay, afterward. He's still really struggling." Sunny explained, weakly attempting to argue in his friend's defense.

"We all are." Kel frowned.

"B-But..."

Kel could see Sunny's concern. Basil had just lost his grandmother. On top of everything that had happened between his friends and the truth, Basil was now having the time to come to terms with losing the only family he ever appeared to have had. Because of that, Basil had arguably hurt himself worse than he'd hurt anyone else.

...

Kel exhaled and let out an awkward smirk. "It's okay. If we talk... I won't scare him or anything. I promise."

Sunny remained silent. He looked as if he were frozen again; petrified in the bed where he lay.

...

"Oh, that reminds me..." Kel spoke, removing the backpack from around his shoulder and unzipping it. He took a moment to dig around in its contents before removing what he had been searching for. A canned soda.

"It's not exactly cold anymore, but good ol' Joe always used to make me feel better when I was sick." He stated, placing the orange can on the drawer beside Sunny's bed.

"I hope this stuff isn't like... banned in hospitals, or something." Kel pondered. "It probably would be if we were in a dentist's office."

Sunny let out a weak smile.

"I don't know when you're getting out of here, but give me a call before you guys leave town, alright?" Kel requested. "I need some space right now, but I'll still be back if you guys end up stuck in Faraway for a while."

Sunny nodded in silence.

Kel nodded in return. He re-zipped his bag and prepared to quietly exit the room.

...

“Kel.”

"Yeah?"

"Thank you. For... *everything."*

Kel smiled. “See you later?"

…

“Y-Yeah.”

Kel stepped back into the hallway but immediately had to stop himself for a moment. He stood in silence and wiped the corner of his eye.

*The young man exhaled and began to walk away, the barely-audible sound of a person quietly sobbing emanating from somewhere in the room behind him.*

---

Kel sat awake by himself and stared at his CRT television as it flickered slightly in the darkness. He had put a game on, but didn't feel like playing it. He just couldn't sleep.

Kel let his gaze drift into the darkness which enveloped the other side of the room. The light from the TV reflected off of Hero's trophy collection, but Kel's brother himself remained absent.

*It was really late. Hero had still not come back.*

It wasn't really like Hero to disappear at night like this. Kel's brother was usually the one insisting to him the merits of getting a good night's sleep, and of waking up early.

The young man sprawled across the floor and stretched his arms.

...

*At what point should he start getting worried?*

*What would Hero even be doing out this late? Did he go somewhere? Maybe he'd-*

Kel sat up as he heard footsteps in the hallway. The door suddenly creaked open, and the Kel watched Hero flinch suddenly as the older boy realized his brother was still awake.

"Haha! You scared me." Hero laughed. "I was wondering what that light was..." Kel's brother entered the room and took off his shoes.

"Couldn't sleep?" He asked.

"Yeah." Kel confirmed. "Where'd you go?"

"Just... out for a walk."

"Oh."

Hero changed his clothes and laid down on his old mattress while Kel sat up and finally turned the TV off. The room returned to darkness.

...

"It's been nice spending time with Aubrey again, hasn't it?" Kel's brother stated.

"Eh... it's been okay." Kel tentatively agreed. Hero chuckled slightly.

"She's just always so **mad** all the time." Kel complained. "I keep feeling like she's suddenly going to attack me again."

"I'm sure she'll come around." Hero reassured him. "She's been through a lot."

"Yeah." Kel confirmed.

...

"I think... you and me need to look out for Aubrey."

"Yeah, yeah... I get it..." Hero's brother exhaled.

*"Kel. I mean it."*

"I know." Kel confirmed.

"Once I go back to school... it's going to be up to you." Hero stated.

Kel let out a self-satisfied smirk as he peered at his brother lying in the shadows on the opposite side of the room. "Worried I can't handle things here by myself?" He asked.

"No. I know you can." Hero denied.

*Kel flinched slightly. He wasn't expecting his sibling's response to be so serious.*

...

Kel scratched himself. "I'll watch out for her... but she has plenty of her own friends, now."

"Maybe." Hero agreed. "But she only has one of *you.*"

"**Ewww**..." Kel grimaced. "What the heck, Hero... *don't say it like that..."*

Hero laughed.

...

"We have a busy day tomorrow." He stated.

Kel nodded.

"Try to get some sleep?" Hero suggested.

"Yeah."

*"Goodnight, Kel."*

"'Night, bro."

# The Stare

Chapter Notes

Thanks for reading.

*Polly sits at the dinner table, but there's no food. The sun had all but vanished into the clouds on this particular evening, and yet the lights in the house remained off. She could turn them on if she really wanted to. She doesn't.*

The caretaker slowly sips a warm mug of tea as she looks over the dimly-lit polaroid photographs strewn across the table in front of her. There were only a handful of them, but every image seemed as if it called out to Polly. She felt it was horribly wrong of her to look at these pictures without Basil's permission... but yet she could not bring herself to turn away this time. She felt that if she continued to obsess over them, then maybe they would eventually reveal something that she had been missing all along.

*Something that would help her understand.*

Polly stands from the table and cleans the remaining dishes in the sink before sitting back down once more. She had been reclining in this chair for hours, and thought it best she stretch her legs... but found herself back in her previous position almost immediately.

No matter how many hours she spent trying to live her life as if nothing had happened, that couldn't be further from the case. After all, her days in this house had long been spent looking after a pair who deserved her constant attention. Unfortunately for her, this home's other occupants had vanished one after the other.

The only thing Polly takes care of now is a collection of potted plants, each of which seemed to solemnly mourn alongside her. She felt that if those plants could speak then they would've understood her misery. After all, one of their own was missing. The sad herb which had watched over each of them for years was now gone.

Polly continues tirelessly pondering over and over where those two boys might have needed to go and why. She keeps telling herself that there's no point in continuing to obsess over what she could have said or done differently, but she could not stop herself. *How could she?*

The morning after they both vanished, the authorities had interviewed her for a long time. That near-ceaseless torrent of questions was exhausting, but at the very least it felt nice to see such an intensive effort being put into finding the missing duo.

Polly had been reassured that since Sunny and Basil had seemingly run away or disappeared while under the hospital's supervision, she could not be legally found at fault as a caretaker, seeing as her client was not her responsibility at the time that they vanished. This incident was the result of 'severe mismanagement' and 'highly inappropriate security protocol from the hospital staff,' they stated.

*Polly didn't care. She wasn't interested in being told who was at fault or for what, it didn't change anything. Basil was gone either way.*

But they consistently elaborated their pointless reassurances, regardless.

Under normal circumstances, the two boys would not have been allowed to stay in contact after Basil had injured his friend, but at the time the two of them had arrived in the hospital, nobody was entirely aware of what happened. Once it became very clear that their injuries were indeed the result of a direct altercation, they had already been placed in their own rooms and given heavy sedative painkillers. The hospital staff had then erroneously assumed that any further security measures were thereby *'unnecessary,'* the authorities informed her.

According to the police, once the condition of Basil's friend had stabilized and he had become lucid again, the hospital staff should have under no circumstances allowed the two any point of contact with each other, and the fact that they had failed something so simple was a mark of severe mismanagement- one that could have legal consequence for the acting doctors involved. Whether or not the children themselves had claimed that they were no longer a threat to one another was irrelevant, they should not have been allowed in the same room together at any point.

The authorities argued that the hospital staff saw the two children getting along and wrongly assumed that simply and repeatedly escorting the victim out of his assailant's room was enough, when in reality there should have been significant security measures set in place to completely restrict the boys movements until the point that one of them was in stable enough condition to be transferred somewhere else, an event that should have taken place **much** earlier given that both of their vitals had been stable for days.

The victim's mother in particular had seemingly been rather upset about this, but Polly was reassured again that she was not in any legal danger since she was not responsible for the medical establishment's misconduct, nor for the actions taken by her underage client.

*Their polite reassurances almost came across as unintentional insults. Polly really didn't care about any of their pointless hand-wringing and idiotic legal blathering. It didn't matter. Just talking about any of it while two wounded children were missing from the hospital made Polly feel disgusted with herself.*

Since she was Basil's current legal guardian, they let her know what they had found. The police had explained their recent findings to her rather thoroughly, but from her perspective it still was not much. Most of the boy's belongings were missing, and that fact initially led the authorities to conclude that the most likely explanation for the pair's disappearance was that they themselves had intentionally fled the hospital's confinement for an (as of now) unconfirmed reason.

Given the largely negative circumstances the two missing persons were currently in, they found the most likely explanation was that the pair had intentionally fled the hospital, but investigators did find it rather strange that they would want to escape the hospital alongside *each other*, given that Basil was the one who had caused significant injury to his acquaintance in the first place. It had been tentatively suggested (to Polly's intense annoyance) that their disappearance might have been initiated by her client, as Basil had already shown a clear willingness to cause his friend harm, and his self-inflicted injuries further underlined the older boy's unstable mental state. Polly tried to argue with them but there was little she could say in Basil's defense. Given what Basil had done to Sunny, it was entirely reasonable for the authorities to assume he was primarily at fault for their shared disappearance. Polly felt a knot in her stomach.

However, the police had also concluded that it was unlikely someone with Basil's injuries could've held anyone as a direct hostage, so if the pair had fled together, it was almost certainly considered a mutual benefit rather than being some kind of unforeseen kidnapping scenario. The personal accounts of hospital staff compounded this idea, as all of them stated very definitively that the two missing persons seemed almost obsessively attached to one another, especially considering the circumstances. Those statements felt increasingly distressing to Polly as two more days without news of Basil passed by.

Despite the injuries they had sustained during their altercation, neither had been in any serious legal danger (seeing as they were both still minors), so the idea that they were fleeing the law seemed fairly ridiculous. The idea that some kind of mutually-coercive, self-destructive relationship had formed between the two was considered, and that opened up the very significant possibility that the missing teens had left with the explicit intention of harming themselves.

But although they were putting in a lot of initial effort, the Faraway police force also seemed generally... *unconcerned.* Given the physical state of the missing persons, it was unlikely that they could have gotten far, and the pair was expected to either be found nearby or rendered incapable of evading authorities due to the injuries they had inflicted on each other.

The Faraway police force had expected to locate them within a single day, but after that outcome failed to occur as desired, the situation had seemingly begun to be treated with a bit more direct action.

Their latest effort had been focused on further investigating the pair's immediate family, as they found it likely that the vanished duo would have sought shelter with someone they trusted, although it was unknown why anyone who could be assisting them wouldn't simply return the pair to the hospital for proper medical care. It had to be assumed that they must have been hiding out somewhere near or in Faraway, as the significant injuries they had sustained would have restricted their ability to flee any meaningful distance. The weather in Faraway had also taken a turn for the worse on the night of their disappearance, so the odds that the two of them had gone anywhere without shelter seemed absurdly low.

The authorities then concluded that (assuming Sunny and Basil had fled the hospital themselves) they likely would have needed help getting anywhere, so it was expected the duo

must have been assisted by an unknown third party. Therefore, if they were with a close friend or family member, it was believed they were likely being *intentionally hidden.*

Polly had not heard from Basil's parents a single time despite feverishly attempting to contact them on countless occasions since their son's disappearance. She had provided the authorities with the necessary contact info for the missing couple, but strangely enough it seemed not even they could manage to get into touch with them... at least not yet.

They let her know that the other boy's guardians were also being interrogated. Sunny's mother had been cooperating with the police, but the child's father was seemingly out of the picture. The fact they could not get into contact with three out of four parents of the kids involved had led the authorities to consider each of these missing guardians to be (at the present moment) *significant suspects* in the two boy's sudden relocation.

They had asked Polly over and over if she knew of any reason that any of these three individuals might have wanted to aid the pair in their disappearance, but she had nothing to provide them. Even after all these years, Polly still barely knew anything about Basil's parents, and she only knew of the other boy from the limited time she had seen the pair interacting in the hospital.

For the police, the overwhelmingly dismissive (or complete lack of) response by those three parental figures in reaction to their heavily-injured and now-missing children was incredibly unusual behavior, and it further reinforced the idea that there might have been some amount of foul play or illegal involvement at hand.

That dismissive response also reinforced the idea that the two boys had intentionally fled, as it was clear that both suffered from very broken (or borderline destructive) home lives. They both fit the general profile of young individuals who had understandable motivations to disappear. The issue at hand was figuring out where they had actually disappeared *to.*

Faraway Hospital was an old building that had been operating for many years. Although it had experienced several modernizations, the structure itself was lacking a sufficient number of security cameras. The lobby of the building had been outfitted with a camera for standard safety reasons, but the hospital administrator admitted after the two boy's disappearance that the building had one back exit in particular (intended for use by the medical staff) which did not have any security measures in place other than being constantly locked from the inside.

Seeing as none of the other cameras appeared to reveal anything of note, it was assumed that the pair had descended the stairway and escaped through the back exit of the building.

The likelihood of the pair being stolen directly from the hospital itself seemed incredibly low, but some of the local homeless were still suspected of possibly being involved in the disappearance, as there was precisely one reported sighting of two young people in Faraway Park on the night that they vanished. Seeing as that instance was currently the only reported sighting after the two had left the hospital, the authorities (and community in general) had become somewhat suspicious of the park's questionable nighttime residents.

The idea that a homeless person managed to sneak into a public hospital unnoticed and somehow silently kidnap two teenage boys seemed rather ridiculous, though. If someone had

taken them directly from the hospital itself, then not only would that unnamed party have somehow avoided going in the front door to the lobby and being caught on-camera, they would have also had to likely have been someone that the pair trusted enough to have followed them outside the building via the back-door.

The only notable evidence of the pair's hospital escape that was found outside of the building itself was a number of polaroid photographs that had been located by the old lake in the woods a few miles away. Inquisitions aimed at the pair's old friends and acquaintances had revealed such a location to be a place of significant relevance to both of the missing persons, so it had initially been assumed that the images left behind were some kind of intentional message... *but there did not seem to be any sort of written confession or shared suicide note if that were the case.*

In fact, Polly was told that the images which were found in the forest were in no comprehensible order whatsoever. They had not been placed or organized in a way that suggested any particular intent, but were instead aimlessly scattered about the woods like discarded refuse.

It appeared as if either the message the two left behind had been destroyed by the wind as it violently flung the polaroids and scattered them about the forest, or that the photos being left behind was itself the statement... *assuming there even was an intention to be found at all.* It largely did come across to investigators as if the images had simply been discarded or tossed aside. Polly had wondered if it was possible that the pair disposing of images depicting themselves as children would itself hold some kind of meaning in the minds two emotionally-distressed teenagers, but it was also possible that such items had simply fallen out of the duo's possession while they hurriedly made their escape.

The authorities had repeatedly drilled Polly on whether or not she understood what had motivated the two boys to harm each other in the first place, but she could only ever deny that she possessed such information. Polly felt like an idiot for not demanding better answers from Basil while he was still with them, but she had not wanted to force him to explain any more of his history while his mental condition was still so... *unstable.* Both of them could have very easily died that night.

Basil had made a serious attempt on his own life. If the blonde still would not tell her why even after something like that... *then the idea of trying to squeeze it out of him by force seemed extremely dangerous.*

Basil wasn't stupid. He had to have had a reason. *He had to...*

The forests surrounding Faraway were large, but not infinite, and if the two were still somehow hiding in the woods at the edge of town it was highly unlikely that they wouldn't have been located by now. Using the few notable belongings which were still present at the hospital, the police had deployed scenting dogs to potentially hunt the missing teens down, but results had been lacking thus far. It was assumed the odor profile of two bandaged hospital teens would have been very easy for their hounds to follow, but nothing had come of it.

Regardless, the authorities politely reassured her on numerous occasions that even though it had been a few days, they still fully expected to find both boys alive and safe.

*Because they hadn't found any bodies yet.*

Polly added that cruel missing statement in her own head. They clearly still believed that they would find Sunny and Basil as they had not yet found either of them dead. If Sunny or Basil really had left the hospital to harm themselves, it was obvious they had ample time to have done so by now... and would likely not have travelled too far in search of a location complete their mission, as the longer they spent on the run the more probable it became that the police would find them first. If it had been their intention to end their own lives, the boys were almost certainly already dead.

*Listening to all this, Polly felt like she was going to die as well. Her throat was just going to close up completely, and that would be the end of it.*

They had returned to Polly all of the polaroids that had been located during the search after all such images were checked for unexpected fingerprints and had afterward been deemed irrelevant as potential objects of evidence. She was given a total of five images, all of them depicting random scenes of Basil and his friends. His lost friends...

All of them seemed somewhat noteworthy to her, but one of the photos in particular stuck out to Polly. Two girls she could not identify were placing a crown of flowers into Basil's hair. Basil was smiling.

She squints and scratches her head as she mindlessly obsesses over this image of hers. The scene depicted in the polaroid she now holds feels like some sort of supernatural event... *a work of fiction.* It didn't seem as if it could have possibly been a moment taken from reality. It couldn't be real, because Basil never smiled like that. He never blushed like that.

**Fun**. In this image, Basil is having fun. He isn't tired, anxious, or distressed. He isn't miserable, or afraid, or trying desperately to hide the fact that he was at the end of his rope. This is not the Basil which Polly knew, but the one who had been had been lost to time. This Basil was happy, and you could see it written all over his face. In this image, Basil is simply squirming with lightly-embarrassed discomfort as he struggles to accept affection from people who clearly care for him. People who accept him the way he is.

Two girls are placing upon his head a crown of flowers seemingly just because it suited him all too well. That floral circlet genuinely appeared as if it belonged there. Polly wonders if this moment was the reason that familiar pink clip had always been so closely entangled in Basil's hair. That pink flower that always looked as if it were somehow a part of him.

Staring at this image put many things into perspective for Polly, even if she wished it didn't.

*This was what Basil had lost. The girl holding the crown was the girl who had ended her own life. Sunny's sister. You could see the resemblance. She was quite pretty.*

The younger girl is unidentifiable to Polly. Someone she had never met, it seemed. An unknown girl from Basil's past that she might never know anything about, because Basil wouldn't be able to tell her about this person himself.

*Or at least that's what she had thought at first.*

But in the countless minutes that passed as she stares at this impossible image, the faint resemblance finally dawns on her. She looked very different back then, but there was no mistaking it. This was the girl with the pink hair. The one who had come and stayed to see Basil that night. Her name was *Aubrey.*

Those four had truly known Basil for quite a while. She didn't understand how the boy never spoke of them at all.

To many observers, the scene captured by this polaroid might seem rather quaint or insignificant. It was nothing but a group of children having pointless fun, after all. Polly figured that the average viewer would likely only bother to comment upon the fact that the person being adorned in flowers was not a girl... *as if that somehow mattered.*

But to Polly, this image seemed to contain so much that it was almost difficult to accept.

It might have seemed like insignificant fun, but it wasn't. When Basil had lost the world which he'd captured within these images, he'd lost everything along with it. He wasn't like other kids. If he lost all his friends, he did not have the caring shoulders of a loving family to cry on. He had his grandmother's shoulders, but hers were weak and frail... trapped on the verge of growing forever limp beside her grandson.

Staring into these images, Polly suddenly feels rather stupid. Of course Basil must have lost something special like this when that girl died. It was obvious from the way he'd become, but seeing it in front of her own eyes suddenly made it all seem so... *real. Inescapable.*

It was now clear to her that Basil had a wonderful group of friends when he was young. She thinks back to all the moments in her own life in which she had lost or drifted away from her friends through either feigned indifference or mistaken absence. At her age, it was not at all uncommon for one to float apart from their friends simply by becoming fiercely wrapped up in work or obligation.

*But that was so idiotic, wasn't it?* This was what life should have really been about. After all, when Basil lost all of this, it had destroyed him. Basil was good in school, but he didn't have any interest in it. Basil cared ceaselessly for his plants, but seemingly only as a distraction... as something he used to enjoy but now only motivated him through familiarity. Those beloved flowers were something from back then which he still kept living with him now, but they were no replacement for the people he had lost. Nothing ever would be.

The photo camera that sat in Basil's room was always thick with dust, as he apparently had nothing left in his life worth capturing. Polly had dusted the object off herself on occasion,

but it would only begin to collect those stray particles all over again. That was because Basil never touched it, not even for a moment. And yet, it was always kept on permanent display, right by his bedside. A horrid reminder, perhaps.

Or maybe something even worse. *A twisted form of self-punishment.*

Losing those friends had placed a burden on Basil. Not just a silent mourning of what he had lost, but a hopeless shadow that lingered around him every single day. A dark net of creeping vines that seemingly hung over him no matter what he did with himself.

Polly knew from experience that when one loses the family they love, it forces them to question themselves. They begin to wonder why they do anything that they do, if all of it was so much less important than what they had already lost. And if they had lost something so precious, would anything new ever be that good again? Or was their life now only in permanent decline from that point forward?

For better and for worse, loss seemed to mature people in that way. It forced them to contend with what parts of life were actually worth the effort. Which were worth caring about and which weren't.

For Basil, it had appeared that almost everything had been placed squarely into the *"weren't"* category. That boy held no real connection to anything but his grandmother, so it was no wonder he ended up in the condition that he did. It was no wonder he went as far as he did.

Basil had been in decline. Polly had seen it herself. She had watched that slow descent as it took place right in front of her, and yet she accomplished nothing in her attempts to prevent him from disappearing into the shadows.

That web of thorns slowly strangled him to death, and all Polly had done was watch. Was that really the only thing she could have accomplished?

...

She takes a moment to make herself another mug of tea. She doesn't want it, and she doesn't need it, but she makes it anyway. She's lost count of how many cups she had consumed at this point, but she doesn't care. She's not interested in sleeping anymore, since there was no reason not to stay up late on these empty nights.

*After all, her job was so easy now!* There was no one left for Polly to look after. She was merely stuck in a holding position, just endlessly waiting and waiting for a call from the boy's parents to inform her that her position sitting here waiting for Basil was no longer needed or desired. Until then, the only actual person left in this miserable house for the caretaker to be taking care of was herself.

***And if she didn't, then there was no one left to tell her she wasn't very good at her job.***

Polly's eyes drift from image to image, lingering on one only to bounce to another and then back around again.

Her eyes drift back to an image of two boys lying together on the grass. Polly had managed to identify them both quite quickly, despite the obvious difference in age. Sunny and Kel laid on the grass and peered through the circular shape of an improvised crown of flowers. It was similar to the one Basil wore in the other image, if a bit scruffier.

Unlike the picture with his sister and Basil, this photo was taken very close to the subject's faces. You could see deeply into Sunny's eye in this image. Polly thought about how that was the only eye he still had left today... the one which Basil had stolen having been hidden under the primitive censorship provided by a wreath of flowers and leaves. A beautiful, nightmarish portent had been captured in this image.

As she continued staring, she pondered how long these photos had laid dormant in Basil's album before the day it was taken from him. Polly always knew of the photo album, but she had only seen it with her own two eyes but a handful of times. It seemed to disappear on all but the most grey, dreary, hopeless days. She didn't know where Basil kept it most of the time... but it was clear he must have been hiding it away somewhere quite private. Polly originally thought the album was being hidden from **her**, but eventually she came to wonder if Basil was, in reality, hiding it from *himself.*

She only opened it once herself, on a rainy day when she was entirely sure Basil would not notice. She regretted doing so almost immediately.

What she saw tucked away in those pages made her stomach turn. The sight of those images drove a twisting, nauseous sensation into her head. The contents of that album were something never meant for her eyes, and that truth was obvious.

They are images of young people, but each photo had been extensively obscured. Every image was scarred by empty blackness, as if someone had been defacing them with marker. Polaroids of happy children, intentionally violated by an unknown assailant's miserable, resentful hands.

They were happy memories, *Basil's* happy memories... which had seemingly been destroyed by hatred, sadness or contempt.

Polly shut the album immediately and returned it to its resting place. Her pulse was racing but she refused to open it again and turn the page. She told herself she wanted to respect Basil's privacy (and she certainly did) but she also backed away from the album because it scared her. It felt as if gazing upon it was going to unveil some kind of terrible realization about Basil that Polly wanted to receive from the boy himself. She felt that if she looked into that collection of images, it would only lead her to make more and more false assumptions about Basil, when she wanted the real, honest truth more than anything.

She could have looked inside once more, but she didn't want to. She had spent so long trying to get Basil to open up that forcing him to reveal his past to her in such a backhanded way felt like an unforgivable action.

It also felt like cheating. To look inside was to give up or take the easy way out, and Polly had become quite stubborn when it came to Basil.

She didn't want to knock down his doors and force her way inside. She wanted Basil to invite her in of his own free will. Polly wanted Basil to trust her. So she wouldn't look in there. Never again.

So on that day when she had spotted Basil sitting on the living room floor and looking at those images with his two friends, she was almost a little jealous... but more than anything she was surprised. *Surprised that Basil would've chosen to reveal those pictures to anyone.*

But when she stole a quick glance from across the room that lingering surprise turned into sudden confusion. Confusion because the pictures Basil displayed no longer appeared to be blackened at all. Someone had cleansed each one of them, somehow.

It was definitely not Basil who had cleaned them. Basil would never do that himself. If they had lasted for what could have been months or even years without being scrubbed of that darkness, it was obvious he could not have been the one who fixed them, as he would have likely done so long ago. Those images had been left decimated on purpose... so whoever cleaned them must have disagreed with the shadows which Basil had let linger on his friend's faces. It seemed as if those precious memories were still precious... *but perhaps to someone that wasn't Basil.*

Thus it now felt quite unforgivable that a handful of those images had suddenly fallen into her possession after Basil had vanished, but it was still far from all of them. Four pictures was a tiny fraction of what was contained within that album.

Polly hoped that wherever he was, he wouldn't hate her for looking at these. Basil disliked getting his photo taken... *so these images were all she had of him, now.*

...

She needs to get up. She knows she can't keep sitting here anymore. But despite her attempts to rise once again, she couldn't. There weren't any more distractions left to use on herself. The house was clean, with every inch organized. There was more food in the pantry than a single person could consume in months.

She had gone grocery shopping earlier that day. There was no real reason to do so as the fridge still had plenty of food in it, but she felt the need to temporarily distract herself from the empty building. She always calmed down slightly when she was just continuing her normal routine; pretending as if they were both going to simply be home soon. Pretending as if Basil was just about to come back and the fridge needed to be promptly stocked for his arrival. He was a growing young man, after all.

*Not that he ever ate enough while he was here.*

...

Shopping was the last task she had left. She had intentionally saved it for last, because she thought it would make everything feel the most... *normal.* It didn't work. The mundane normalcy of her surroundings only seemed to make the tragedy she had just witnessed feel even worse. Looking at the unconcerned faces of random passerby wandering down the halls of Othermart felt like some kind of twisted, surreal joke.

Polly was good at remembering faces. Identifying a person in a crowd. Maybe it was because so much of her line of work involved leaning in and listening closely to people who struggled to speak through old age.

Children were the same way, but to a different extreme. They often struggled to speak simply because they were children.

Basil struggled to speak for reasons that were seemingly unique to him.

Over the years, Polly had learned that if you watched the way people's expressions subtly change, you could predict what they were going to ask you for help with before they had to utter the words themselves. It was a useful skill to develop when amongst both the elderly (who were often stubborn in regards to accepting the help they needed), and children, (who often didn't know of their own needs in the first place).

She took great pride in this carefully-honed skill, but it wasn't as if her ability to predict her clients was always entirely accurate. Guessing right was still extremely satisfying, though.

*'How did you know?'* They would ask. Polly would then quietly smile to herself, undeniably smug.

Its because she's a professional. With a job that has so much dull downtime it was necessary to keep yourself entertained by the little things. Find moments of satisfaction where you could. Enjoy something as simple as studying the face of another person.

*That was exactly why. It was because she was so good at identifying faces that this image bothered her so much. Why the image of Sunny and Kel haunted her more than the others.*

She wished it was possible to simply reach into the image and remove the flower circlet that obscured his face so she could force him to look right at the camera without becoming unintentionally hidden.

Then she would know. She'd be able to confirm for herself why that boy felt so familiar... why every second she had watched Basil spend with him had buzzed around inside her head. Back then... *was that really the first time Sunny had come over to their home?*

She didn't feel the same way towards Kel. He was a nice boy, but Polly felt no sense of familiarity from him. That was definitely the first time the two of them had seen each other.

But Sunny... *was it really the first time she had seen **him**?*

Faraway was a small town, and so it wasn't unusual to frequently see the same faces wandering in the same places, doing the same things in the same way they had always been done. That sense of familiarity was something Polly had not experienced since the days when she was still a schoolkid, and it was a feature of this small town that she tended to enjoy... but even the caretaker had to admit things got a little boring around here sometimes.

She never got tired of seeing those same people, though. The supermarket was where Polly could see those reoccurring faces the most frequently. Even if she didn't always talk to everyone she passed by, she still liked to imagine what they were doing in their own lives, what they were looking forward to, what they were worried about...

She had enjoyed the shared sense of mundanity, back then.

But not every trip was as mundane as every other. Oftentimes, when she would go shopping by herself, she would cross paths with a very peculiar woman. Whenever Polly saw this woman... or rather, whenever this woman saw **her**, a strangely discomforting event would take place. It was an event which would follow her back home, and linger in the back of her head for the rest of the evening.

Polly would glance at this unknown woman as they passed each other, and immediately find herself meeting the other person's gaze. Their eyes would lock for a moment, and her stare would linger for just long enough that Polly's mind would begin telling her that something was wrong. Polly had never really been stared at in that way. Not from a stranger.

It was difficult for her to rationalize it to herself, but Polly felt as if she was not simply being looked at, but visually picked apart. Broken down into pieces and reassembled in mere seconds. The woman inspected her face as if searching desperately for something. Digging relentlessly into a total stranger. The stare would last only those few seconds, but each one of them felt like an eternity.

It wasn't the fact that she didn't know this person, or the fact that she was staring, or the duration of the stare... but the *look* on her face. That expression stuck with Polly. An expression of... *fear? Anger? Pity? Disgust? Sadness?* Why? Why was she looking at her like that? Was she just crazy? Some insane lady was trying to scare her for no reason?

People in Faraway tended to mostly mind their own business, and that's why she was so bizarre. Why her prolonged glances crawled inside Polly's head.

Polly was not one to stare, but when someone stared at her, she found it difficult not to stare back. It was a natural reaction.

But that locking of eyes would not last long. The woman would always quickly look away, as if that extended gaze was simply an accident. Two eyes lingering for a little too long on a random stranger, nothing more. A bizarre stare becoming swiftly ignored by its creator.

And yet, those events were a reoccurring trend. Every time Polly would finally forget about the strange person who locked eyes with her, she would suddenly appear again. A quiet,

black-haired woman carrying a basket of groceries and silently staring once more.

She always seemed to notice Polly before Polly noticed her. Once the gaze was returned, that interlocking of eyes would last only those few seconds before she continued on as if nothing had happened.

Polly wanted to say something. Call out. Ask if she knew this person, or if this person knew her. Was she someone Polly had forgotten? Had she unknowingly done something to offend this person? Cut her off in traffic, maybe?

It just didn't make sense. Locking eyes with a stranger was not typically a notable occurrence, but the fact that it kept happening over and over... always with that look on her face...

Finally, after more than a year of these bizarre moments, an event that the caretaker had been waiting months for finally took place. Polly approached the checkout with her goods in tow, and there she was again. The woman who had haunted her, quietly and somberly digging into her purse as the cashier rang her up. Polly approached from the side and placed down her own groceries, patiently waiting for her turn to arrive.

For a moment, the woman doesn't notice. She continues silently digging around in her purse before the cashier greets Polly. Polly softly acknowledges the cashier as the woman's face turns. Their eyes do not lock this time. The woman glances in her direction for a fraction of a second and immediately looks away again with a visible frown of discomfort. Polly was seemingly identified swiftly and with little effort... before being decidedly *ignored.*

Polly runs through a list of options in her head. This is her big chance. She can say something. Casually strike up a conversation. Move the loading bar forward.

The woman is checking out with a certain brand of herbal tea that also occupies a matching place in Polly's basket. She gently points out the shared similarity and comments on her personal preferences for the product.

"Yes, it is rather nice isn't it." The woman responds curtly. She'd responded quickly, but didn't seem particularly angry or annoyed... just discomforted. *Agitated.* It was now obvious she had no interest in talking to Polly.

*'Why are you always looking at me?'* Polly feels the urge to just blurt it out. To ask outright if they knew each other. But of course she doesn't. That would be awkward, insensitive, rude... and in all honesty, this person already looked rather miserable. Polly wondered if that was entirely to do with her presence.

And so, they stand together in silence. The cashier finishes ringing up her goods, and the strange woman picks up her basket and walks away. Polly steps forward and prepares to pay for her own goods as a quiet exhale reflexively slips out of her nose.

She's given up. The moment to speak is over. Polly abandoned her chance.

But, to the caretaker's amazement, that woman's head turns back. Before she finally walks away, the black-haired lady glances at Polly one more time, a somber expression lingering on

her face. Her mouth parts just slightly, as if she intends to say something... *but nothing escapes her lips.* She simply stops herself, quietly frowns once more and exits the building alone.

The cashier continues ringing Polly up. The caretaker watches silently as the other woman's shrunken form passes back into the parking lot and slowly creeps away. Gone again.

...

The cashier informs Polly that one of the oranges she'd picked out had a significant bruise on its side and asks her if she still wants it. Polly shakes her head, she hadn't noticed the blemish before. She had been too distracted. Someone must have dropped this fruit on the ground.

It might have been a particularly good orange at some point, but the opportunity to eat it had seemingly already vanished.

---

She often kept a bowl of fruit on the table for the people who used to live in this house, but there was no one around to touch those now. She had bought too many, and nobody was around to eat them anymore. One small apple rolls off the top of the pile and falls to the floor with a soft thud.

Polly glances over the edge of the table and at the lost fruit. For a moment, she only stares at it as it lingers there. She should probably put it back or throw it out. Not that it actually mattered either way.

Polly stands up with her tea and takes a sip as she steps softly over to the wandering fruit. She reaches down and picks up the now-bruised object from the ground. Luckily, apples were a lot more resistant to bruising than orang-

*The mug of tea slips out of her hand and cracks wide open on the floor. Polly picks up the apple and shoots back upward so fast that she nearly bashes her skull against the corner of the table. She scrambles to pick up the image of Basil's friend once more while the liquid she had spilled began to pool under her feet. She studies Sunny's face more fervently than ever. That floral circlet could conceal the truth no longer.*

***She knew it. She knew she had seen those eyes before.***

*So why was his mother always staring?*

# Forest

Chapter Notes

*Merry Christmas!* Thank you for all the kind comments, as always.

If I had planned this better I would have posted a more-dramatic group of chapters for Omori's birthday, but I guess setup still has to go somewhere.

Don't eat too much holiday ham, or whatever the hell people eat at christmas.

*Hero scratched at the back of his neck as him and his companions crept through the mud.*

There are very few signs of human life out here this deep into the woods. One might even make the argument that it was unreasonable for anyone to enter this place at all, given how choked with life the environment already was. This castle of trees belonged solely to mother nature, there was no room for humans here.

Hero had been wandering out here for a few hours with Kel and Aubrey, but the sun was already beginning to fall from the sky once more. A second day in search of their friends had been spent and wasted. They had nothing to show for all their troubles.

Hero glanced at the trees looming over their heads. This forest was only a brief hour-or-so drive outside of Faraway, so it ended up becoming a place that their group had often frequented when they were all younger. Because it had remained largely untouched by the steady march of urbanization which plagued the surrounding area, these woods were considerably more pristine and natural than you might expect considering how closely they lingered to civilization. Maybe that was thanks to the fact that this nondescript forest failed to attract the garbage-toting campers that plagued other, larger nature reserves.

It was a beautiful place filled with a great diversity of life, of the type that sadly became less and less common as the years passed. Hero was glad to see that these woods had remained mostly the same as he remembered... *kind of.*

But for some of Hero's friends, the majesty of nature was only a secondary objective back when they used to visit this place. The reason Mari liked it out here was because these woods were absolutely filled to the brim with weird and awful bugs. Weird bugs she would use to jokingly terrorize Hero. Bizarre and unfathomable insects that squirmed upwards from the earth to disgust him. Beetles and bees and ants and wasps...

*Hero shuddered.* In truth, Mari was not one to torment him all that often (as to prevent the jokes from growing stale, she claimed), but when it came to those six-legged beasts it seemed as if she could not resist employing their unnerving exoskeletal qualities to poke fun at Hero.

*It wasn't that bad, though. If it made her smile and laugh the way she did, Hero could endure looking at a handful of horrible, wriggly bugs and spiders. Once or twice, anyway.*

Luckily for Hero, his other friends did not typically view the forest as a place to test new arachnid-based torture methods. All of them seemed to enjoy their time spent here, but Basil in particular always loved the forest. It wasn't difficult to imagine why.

The enthusiastic photographer would point out various plants to his friends and underline their potential health applications, often going so far as to employ fictional survival scenarios to hold Kel's attention on the topic. Hero could never hide the fact that he was always quite impressed by how much Basil seemed to understand about the plants around them, especially since he always seemed to have something new to say no matter where they ended up. Even though Hero was older, he oftentimes found himself simply falling in line and enjoying the herbology lecture alongside everyone else.

Did he learn all this stuff from his grandmother, or his books, or both? Hero always wondered.

*But maybe it was something even simpler. Maybe because of his name, Basil felt as if that was the kind of stuff he had to know... as silly as that sounded.*

Or maybe Hero was just projecting. He often felt a bit of pressure to try and live up to his own ridiculous nickname. Quite laughably, it only referred to his childhood love of a certain sandwich... but when his friends referred to him by his edible title in public he often felt like he needed to suddenly act more mature or impressive somehow so that he didn't come across like an egotistical prick.

Maybe it was wrong of him to try and feign adulthood in that way, but it wasn't as if all his practice didn't have its applications. Unless he put his focus into it, Hero couldn't even keep track of his friends half the time... *especially out in the woods.*

When left to their own devices, each of Hero's friends would find their own ways of appreciating the forest. Mari would (more often than not) be hunting for strange animals, Basil would be admiring the flowers, Kel and Aubrey would inevitably find something to argue about (could they not even spare a moment to stay silent while in the sanctity of nature?), and Sunny would be... well, Sunny would always be *somewhere.*

Ironically, Mari's brother was (more often than not) the most difficult member of the group for Hero to keep track of. Given how small, quiet, and oftentimes absentminded he was, Sunny had a tendency to get left behind by his friends while on their casual excursions. This would likely not have occurred so frequently as to become a problem, but Aubrey and Kel were typically quite high-maintenance (to put it politely) and that meant less focus could be given to making sure the six of them always properly stuck together. Due to his unparalleled ability to fade into the background, losing track of a unmarked Sunny often became a serious concern in a place like this.

Luckily, when Mari's brother was missing he had usually just been paired off with one of the other kids; typically with whoever had gotten lost alongside him due to his general slowness. As long as Sunny was with someone else, he would be fine. Even if Hero's youngest

companion was not loud enough to make himself visible when out in the woods, his friends surely were.

In an ideal world, one might be able to predict Sunny's behavior ahead of time as to prevent an inconvenient vanishing act... but Sunny was nothing if not difficult to read. One notable disadvantage created by Sunny's particularly neutral expression is that it oftentimes made it quite difficult to tell if he was emotionless, tired, or just immensely bored. Hero usually figured it was some combination of the first two, but the older boy did still often wonder if Sunny seemingly daydreamed as often as he did because he found the reality around him to be somewhat disinteresting. Sunny always had a bit of absentmindedness to him. Some kind of natural detachment.

When Sunny was left alone, he often started to look as if he had completely disappeared into the recesses of his own mind. Whatever it was that the younger boy was pondering so intensely, Hero hoped it was something good... but that empty expression always made it a bit difficult to tell. Hero occasionally suggested to Mari that her brother's dissociation might be an object of concern, but Mari typically argued that it was just an unchanging aspect of Sunny's character.

*'He's just like that, no worries!'* She'd claim. *Hero wondered if that was really the case.*

But although Sunny might have drifted away into his own head quite often, the others could almost always manage to snap him out of it. Over time, Hero came to realize that each of his friends had their own unique method of dragging Sunny back into reality, every one of which carried its own variable rate of success.

Aubrey's method was the most direct. She would sneak up behind him and poke him lightly in the ribs, cheekily giggling as she challenged herself to see how many pokes she could give before finally being noticed. Unfortunately for him, Sunny was a rather viable victim for such pranks. He never really seemed to mind it, though. In fact, it wasn't always clear at what point Sunny really snapped out of his daze. Hero almost started wondering if Mari's little brother was enjoying the attention.

Hero's simplistic method was considerably less effective than Aubrey's, for whatever reason. Hero would loudly call out Sunny's name in the same way he had always done when shouting to grab Kel's attention, but that skill appeared rather inefficient against Sunny's (seemingly superior) mental defenses. The Kel-call worked for Kel, but Sunny was unfazed by it.

The boy would simply continue sitting by himself in silence, staring at nothing as if he had not at all registered his name being asserted into the wind. More often than not, Hero would have to get progressively closer and closer to Sunny before the other boy finally noticed Hero was trying to get his attention, at which point the shouting became largely contradictory.

Kel's method was far more effective than his older brother's, but also considerably less polite- *a fact that would likely surprise no one.* Kel would assume a running start and then launch his basketball (or any other currently-available weapon) into the air as fast as he could, oftentimes striking Sunny in the back of the head with it. He always claimed he was aiming for a less critical location like the back or shoulder, but that excuse did not make a difference

to Hero. Eventually, him and Mari had to ban the use of projectiles to get Sunny's attention, lest the boy have ended up in the hospital due to comedically-inflicted head trauma.

Hitting Sunny in the head with a ball did work, though... but when the boy's neck swung back around to search for the source of the aerial assault, Sunny's irritation would always be written all over his face. Hero had to note one thing, however: *although it had ultimately been outlawed, Kel's solution was both effective and long-range. At the very least, you had to give him that much.*

*Then there was Basil.*

In Hero's mind, Basil's solution was easily the strangest. It was the strangest because... it wasn't exactly a solution at all. The blonde would quietly walk up beside his best friend and take a seat beside him. Once in position, Basil would simply prop open up a novel (or his album of photos) and patiently wait in complete silence until Sunny finally noticed he was no longer sitting alone. The others didn't have to worry about leaving Sunny behind, because Basil would always volunteer to stay behind with him.

Cute as it was, this behavior was more than a bit odd to Hero since it could often take quite a long time for Sunny to finally snap out of himself. Even Kel's brother had to admit he didn't usually possess that much patience. Hero remained confused about Basil's particular choice for quite a while, so eventually he just asked the gardener about his method directly.

*"Sunny doesn't like being alone, but he still zones out like that when he's thinking... I just don't want him to suddenly snap out of it and then find himself completely isolated from everyone. That's just too... sad."*

Hero's brows raised quite a bit. He wasn't expecting such a serious response. In all honesty, Hero had almost expected that Basil would just admit he was doing it to mess with his friend a little.

But that explanation made more sense. Hero felt as though Basil's softer methods helped balance everyone else out.

But, of course, when it came to the archaic art of wrangling a lost Sunny, none could deny that Mari was the undisputed champion. She oftentimes summoned him without even approaching his distracted form or speaking a single word in his direction. Rather, she would simply stand herself up (from a park bench, fallen log or picnic basket), stretch her arms to the heavens... and ***yawn.***

*It was like a magic trick.* Something about that sound was immensely effective at pulling Sunny out of his own head. Hero didn't understand it at first (and almost felt as if the two of them were playing some kind of ridiculous prank on him) but he noticed the pattern

eventually. Regardless of Sunny's current position, Mari would always stretch and yawn when it was finally time for them to pack their stuff up and go home, and therefore that sound must have implanted itself in Sunny's subconscious such that his brain permanently recognized it as the universal standard flag representing *'it is time to go home now.'* It was an instance of the type of somewhat-awkward secret code which only really ever manifested between close siblings. No one else would possibly be able to replicate it, even if they wanted to.

*And so, Mari was crowned the queen of Sunny summoning. If one wanted to find their way to Sunny, it only made sense to turn their head in her direction.*

*Hero smiled to himself sadly. If only Mari were here to help them find Sunny now.*

---

The young man attempts to snap himself out of his memories and point his attention back to his friends in the present-day.

Aubrey silently walks over a log, while Kel jumps. The two of them were moving side-by-side (a sight that had become increasingly rare these days), but their movements were hardly in sync, and their closeness to one another was likely coincidental. Neither of the two seemed to pay the other much attention. Hero wasn't sure if that was also coincidental or just by choice.

None of them had spoken for a while, which Hero would have liked to believe was simply due to their focus on the task at hand... *but he knew that wasn't really the case.*

Hero cranes his neck from side-to-side, trying to find the walking path which they had deviated from earlier that day, but failing to pinpoint it. They had moved out fairly far into the forest. It was Hero's idea. He had wanted to be thorough.

As Hero looks back and forth, his eyes fall upon a strange-looking, tall plant with bright blue berries that quietly stood in the distance ahead of them. Not *blueberries*... just strange berries that were also blue.

Hero gestures to the patch of colorful vegetation for no reason in particular. "Pretty weird looking plant, right? I doubt those, uh... I doubt those would taste like blueberries, heh." Hero cringed internally at the way he'd fumbled his line. He wasn't even sure why he'd commented in the first place. Maybe he just felt like someone needed to break the silence.

Aubrey lifted her head up slightly to look at the plant in question and smirked slightly. Kel squinted at the plant as they approached it.

"I bet that B-" Aubrey started to say something but then stopped abruptly.

...

"I bet that someone who lives near these woods could tell you if those were safe to eat." She censored herself, her voice becoming slightly quieter. *"I doubt it, though."* She muttered.

"You're probably right." Hero confirmed, unsure of what else could be said about it. They proceeded to pass the *not-blueberry* plant in silence.

For a while that silence persisted, the trio's shared footsteps through the foliage once again becoming the only notable sound in the air. Hero stared at the ground. Their noisy footsteps continued a few more moments, until Hero suddenly noticed the sound had become noticeably quieter.

*Someone had stopped walking. Hero turned his head slightly to look at Kel, wondering for a moment why his brother had ceased moving forward before also coming to a complete stop.*

Kel opened his mouth.

"Are you guys... *serious?"*

...

*Aubrey suddenly stops walking as well, but she doesn't turn back to look at them. She just stares in the same general direction they were moving as if silently waiting to resume.*

"What do you mean?" Hero asks his brother.

*"What do I mean?"* Kel incredulously returns the question, his eyebrows visibly tilted in confusion.

Hero sighed.

"Are we seriously just going to go another entire day without talking about why we're even out here? Like this is just some kind of dumb field trip?" Hero's brother asks.

Aubrey remained silent. Hero tries to speak again.

"Kel-"

"I thought the whole point of this trip was to look for Sunny and Basil... so why are you two acting so weird about *everything?"* Kel cut him off.

"It's called being polite, Kel." Hero frowned slightly at his brother. "We're out here because its what Mari would have wanted. Just because the three of us are out on this trip together that doesn't necessarily mean everyone is comfortable talking about everything that's happened yet."

The older boy's eyes dart to Aubrey's back for a moment. She still hadn't turned around yet. On the opposite end, Kel speaks quickly- practically cutting Hero off again midway through his final sentence.

"It's not just that we 'aren't talking about everything that's happened.'" Kel made air quotations. "Neither of you will even use their names anymore. It's seriously starting to creep me out." Hero's brother shuddered slightly and grimaced as he spoke.

Hero sighed again. "I just... didn't want to bring them up again if either of you two weren't also ready to talk... and I didn't want to say that much either because I didn't want to make it seem like I was trying to pressure you guys into it." He explained.

"Well I for one would like to at least be able to use their names. *Aubrey?"* Kel turned his head to the person in front. Aubrey finally rotated her body slightly.

The pink-haired girl's eyes shifted to the side. Hero thought she might have swallowed before speaking but he wasn't entirely sure.

"Whatever." She shrugged.

...

*"Cool."* Kel stated, his expression still rather annoyed. "So is there anything either of you would like to say **NOW**?"

Hero took a brief moment to listen as the breeze blew through the trees surrounding them before speaking again.

"Not... especially." He admitted.

*"Not especially?"* Kel mirrored, dumbstruck.

"What do you want us to say, Kel?"

Hero instinctively asked an ingenuine question to try and buy himself a bit more time to think, but internally he had to admit that Kel was probably right. This **was** all getting a bit out of control.

"I don't know, like... literally anything at all?" Kel suggested.

Hero opens his mouth to speak again, but closes it quickly as he watches Kel's head turn away. Hero's own gaze follows.

Both brothers subconsciously turn to look at Aubrey, as if waiting to see if she was going to weigh in on this conversation... *but she only briefly returned their glances while remaining completely silent.*

...

"*What the heck is wrong with you two*?" Kel asked, incredulous.

"What is wrong with *you*, Kel." Aubrey finally spoke, returning the boy's question with an irritated tone. "Don't you think if we really wanted to talk about this that we would have brought it up ourselves?"

"No. I don't. Because neither of you ever talk about anything." Kel countered, his voice unsettlingly serious.

Aubrey hesitated as she scowled, failing to talk back to Kel with the same expedited delivery she usually did. The girl silently scratched at her forearm and stared at the ground. Even if she bit back now, she had already hesitated too long for her potential clapback to have carried any real weight.

"Am I wrong?" Kel turned his head back around to stare at his brother as well, challenging him.

Hero gave it an honest thought for a moment. Kel was was right about one thing at least. The fact that they hadn't really talked about any of it was getting out of hand...

*Hero listened to a large branch above them creaking in the wind.*

...

*But then again, maybe it wasn't. Maybe there was no point in discussing something like this.*

"I don't think there's anything to talk about at the moment, Kel." Hero stated. "We either find Sunny and Basil or we don't. What they did isn't really relevant to our search for them."

Aubrey scoffed. "*Not relevant.* I don't know Hero, I think it might be pretty relevant." She disagreed with Hero this time, seeming increasingly irritated.

"You know that's not what I meant." Hero nervously scratched at the side of his face.

"Hero-" Kel started.

"We can talk about what they did... when we find them." Hero speaks over his brother. *"Okay?"*

"But we aren't **going** to find them." Aubrey suddenly exhaled and rubbed something out of her eye with her palm. She started to walk again, drifting in the opposite direction. "This whole trip has been pointless."

The pink-haired girl let out a slight smirk and promptly took a seat on a worn-out stump that had been lingering a few feet ahead of her. Hero watched as she craned her neck upwards to the air and stole a glance at the purple evening sky as it tried to peek its way in at them through the branches.

*"What are we even doing out here?"* Aubrey chuckled to herself, her tone growing notably darker.

Hero picked a fallen leaf off of his shoulder. He assumed his brother might have had more to say, but Kel only stood still and quietly rubbed the back of his neck as Aubrey spoke.

"We've just wasted the last two days doing nothing." She muttered. "There's obviously no one out here. Sunny and Basil didn't go on some nostalgic camping trip in the woods. *God...*"

Aubrey was clearly right, but none of them had vocalized that fact either... *even Kel*. Hero felt as though if he were to acknowledge the obvious futility of their quest, said acknowledgement might cause it to be cut short, which he had personally been avoiding for some reason which he couldn't quite describe even to himself. Hero had already known from the beginning that his friends weren't going to accompany him the entire way, but he still couldn't shake the feeling that this was something they were supposed to do... *together.*

*But maybe that was just him being cowardly. Maybe he was afraid of how he'd feel being back at all these places if he didn't have two of his old friends tagging along to distract him.*

Something bad was happening inside Hero, but he wasn't quite sure what. He hadn't fallen into another hopeless depression, or flown into a rage after what those two had done to her, or been crushed under the weight of the truth... but he still knew that something wrong was going on with him. Even as these trips became more and more hopeless, pointless, and idiotic... Hero only felt himself growing more and more obsessive.

*Its like he was drowning.* The more he tried to fight against the inevitable fact he was going to have to accept... *that those two had truly vanished...* the worse it all became. He was just pointlessly fighting against the changes tides now, desperate to force the universe to stop repeating itself. Desperate to force it to provide some semblance of justice that it always refused them.

But it wasn't going to. Sunny and Basil had ended up in the depths of the lake again... *and Hero was following both of them down to the bottom.*

"So do you guys just want to give up, then? Call it quits?" Kel suggested. Hero wasn't sure if he was being serious or not.

The other two remained silent for a moment.

"I'm not stopping." Hero admitted. "I can't. Even if its pointless, or something that I'm only doing to make myself feel better... *I just can't stop yet."*

Kel and Aubrey turn to look at Hero, and then briefly at each other... before Aubrey sighs and turns her gaze back to the evening sky once again.

"But there's no place left to check, Hero." Aubrey muttered into the empty air. "The beach was the place furthest out, and we went there first. This forest was the last real place left to look."

Hero glanced back up into the sky alongside his friend and tried to steel his growing nerves. "No, it wasn't." He muttered. "There's... one more place I wanted to go."

*Aubrey frowned in confusion.*

# Her Final Trip

Hero and his friends sat together in a booth at a chain restaurant. This establishment seemed fairly busy at the moment, but the corner they were seated in was secluded enough that it wasn't too difficult for Hero to think. Regardless, it was still a bit louder than he would have liked. He wasn't in the mood for this kind of atmosphere, and he figured his friends weren't either. Hero watched his brother release a massive yawn.

*Well, okay. Maybe Kel didn't seem to mind.*

The trio had placed themselves around a circular corner table while they waited for their food. This round booth was more than a bit too big to be utilized by just the three of them, but they had been told to seat themselves by the woman at the front and this was the location Kel had chosen. Aubrey sat at the edge opposite Hero while Kel occupied the middle of the booth, obnoxiously stretching himself out such that he took control of the largest amount of space possible.

Kel was drinking some foreign soda brand that Hero had never heard of, while he himself drank simple ice water. Aubrey had ordered herself a black coffee, even though it was already getting rather late. Hero wasn't sure whether or not that was something he should take note of.

All the small hints of casual conversation between the three of them had finally died down, so the eldest member of the group took this prolonged silence as an opportunity to dig into why they were actually here. Hero took a sip of his water and tried to steel his nerves one last time before he finally spoke.

"Did you guys know it was always Mari who planned all our trips to these places we've been visiting?" He asked.

Aubrey tilted her head slightly, but then slowly nodded. Kel shrugged.

"I tried to help her with planning out a few of them when we were younger, but she'd always end up throwing out more than half of my suggestions anyway." Hero smirked. "She said that travelling was something you couldn't take too seriously, because if you planned out every step then nothing fun would happen."

Aubrey set her coffee down. "I remember. She had always talked about how she was going to see the whole world when she was older." The pink-haired girl paused for a moment, smiling slightly. "She wanted us to go to a lot of those places together."

Aubrey's smile quickly faded.

...

Hero opened his mouth to respond, but he ended up hesitating... *and then fell silent.* A sudden wave of dread seemed to pass over everyone at the table. Kel's expression turned unusually

somber. Aubrey's eyebrows lowered. Hero rubbed the tips of his fingers together while struggling to find the words he needed to speak. He felt something try to build up in his throat.

Aubrey stared down into the murk of the coffee in front of her, a shadowy expression silently lingering on her face. Her eyes held what Hero could only have described as a sort of cold, lifeless anger. The older boy was unsure who or what that anger was directed at. Hero sighed.

*"Yeah."* The older boy confirmed, finally having recomposed himself. "I don't think she ever shared it with any of you, but... she had actually been planning a big end-of-year trip for us, back then. Before she was gone."

Kel's eyebrows tilted. Aubrey's expression softened slightly. She lifted her head back upwards to stare at Hero as he spoke.

"It was for after the recital, as a kind of celebration, I guess. A celebration of the fact that they had both gotten through it. Mari wanted to keep it a secret until she was sure it would be okay with our parents. It was going to be a big surprise that winter, if she could've gotten it all sorted out first."

The other two people at the table continued watching Hero with quiet curiosity, both seemingly unwilling to interrupt. So he continued.

"To be honest, I'm not sure if it would have actually ended up happening. She told me to keep it secret... even though she hadn't really shared much with me anyway." Hero admitted.

"Where was it she wanted to go?" Aubrey inquired.

"She wanted to go really far up north... and do a big celebratory holiday trip in the mountains. Cabins and sledding and other winter stuff like that." Hero stated. "The kind of stuff that you won't really get very much of in Faraway."

"Oh man... that would have been pretty sick." Kel pondered the idea with a smirk on his face.

"She wanted to do something none of us had ever done before while we were all still together. Before me and her went out to university. She had even saved up some of her own money to help pay for it." Hero summarized.

The table was silent once more.

"I was surprised that Mari said she'd gotten her parents on board with taking all of us out there in the first place, to be honest." Hero thought aloud.

"Haha!" Kel suddenly laughed. "That **is** weird. Imagine their dad taking **YOU** along on a big holiday trip. I wonder what kind of cover Mari had to use to get that past-"

*Kel shut up after Aubrey violently kicked him under the table. **Twice**. Hero smirked to himself.*

He had been a bit surprised, too. The idea of being stuck on the road for a few days with Mari's parents had been giving him a bit of anxiety back then... *not that it ever ended up happening.*

"I guess they just wanted to reward her. For all the hard work she had been doing that year."

*Hero paused for a moment, trying to gather his thoughts but finding it difficult. This room really was noisy. The entire establishment was filled with the constant sound of forks hitting plates and drinks being poured.*

"Heh. I was so confused back then... of why she would have put in so much effort into all of it." Hero scratched at the side of his face. "Her recital, her plans for the future... if she was just going to leave it all behind."

Hero was smiling slightly as he spoke but didn't understand why. He couldn't stop himself, for whatever reason.

"But she didn't leave it behind. Of course she wouldn't." He muttered.

*It was all just... taken away,* Hero thought. He struggled to recompose himself but was failing at it this time. Hero refused to look at either of his companions directly, but he could tell from his peripheral that their faces had started growing uneasy. He should have just stopped talking earlier. Hero needed to get a hold of himself. A tiny bead of sweat tried to form on his forehead.

*It was too loud in here. There was a group of middle-aged women across the room who were being way too noisy in front of everyone else. Acting like the whole universe belongs to them. People like that should learn to just shut the fuck up.*

"Are you okay, Hero?" Aubrey quietly asked while staring into her coffee, seemingly incapable of looking at his expression any longer. The strange smirk still refused to leave Hero's face.

...

*"Are any of us?"*

...

Hero had been ready to say 'yes,' just like he had done before. But in that moment... *it just felt too fake*. Aubrey didn't say anything back, she just quietly exhaled and placed her face into her hands. Kel was disturbingly quiet. His previous attempt to claim as much booth space as possible had seemingly ended while Hero wasn't paying attention.

The hopeless wave of silence looming over them persisted for almost a minute before Kel finally set it aside.

"Alright so, where was this last place you were saying you wanted to go?" Kel asked his brother, seemingly trying to move the conversation to something a bit more solid. "Can we get there tonight or do we need to meet back up tomorrow?"

*"The mountains."* Hero stated.

"Huh?" His brother replied.

"North. Her final trip. I'm going."

*Kel froze.* Aubrey lifted her gaze from the table again. The other two stared at him, still somewhat unclear on how serious Hero was being.

Aubrey glanced at Kel as if she expected the other boy to object somehow, but Hero's brother just continued staring at him, seemingly trying to pick apart something in his face. Aubrey finally spoke again.

"Hero..." She spoke rather gently. "You know Sunny and Basil aren't-"

"*I know.* I know they're gone. I know we're never going to find them. This has all been just as pointless as you said it was." Hero admitted, taking a weary breath.

"So why are you saying you want to go all the way-"

"Because nothing has changed." Hero cut her off once more, feeling momentum start building up in his head as he spoke. "I thought that if I went to all these old places we shared with her that I'd finally learn how to accept... *any of it.* I thought it would help me somehow. *I thought it might help all of us."*

Hero glanced at the old bandage poking out from underneath Aubrey's sleeve. Her face reddened slightly and she broke eye contact again.

"But just listen to me..." Hero smirked once more. *"I'm losing it.* I've only gotten progressively more obsessed these last two days. I'm not moving on from this, I'm disappearing into it."

Hero's companions said nothing as his monologue continued. Aubrey shuddered for a moment. Hero felt like he should stop himself but he couldn't manage it.

"I thought I was finally starting to move forward. That I was making new friends and learning new things and finally letting her go. Seeing Sunny leave his house again, meeting up with all of you... actually talking through it." Hero grit his teeth. "And then all of this happens. They're both just... *gone."*

Kel scratched at the side of his neck. Hero's brother looked as if he was going to speak up but he didn't. Aubrey's eyes had fallen back down to the table and remained there.

"I can't go back like this. Once summer ends and I have to return to the dorms I'm going to lose my mind. Unless something changes, I'm just going to keep falling back into everything all over again. Over and over..." Hero muttered.

"So this was never about Sunny and Basil." Aubrey quietly stated. *"Or Mari."*

...

"No." Hero confirmed. "*I'm sorry.* This was about... *me."*

Kel scratched at his neck in silence.

"I had this idea in my head before we did anything else." Hero stated. "If I still couldn't force myself to accept any of it, I was going to leave. I didn't want to tell either of you because I know how pointless and stupid it is."

*"It isn't stupid... to want to move past this..."* Aubrey refuted him, her voice shaking slightly. "I just don't think that is going to help anything, Hero."

"Then what else do you think I should do?" Hero inquired. Aubrey hesitated for a moment and bit her lip.

"This was the last thing she wanted." Hero stated. "It was the last thing she had ever committed herself to that I had known about."

"So you're... going to go on a skiing trip?" Kel asked, dumbfounded. Aubrey glared at him.

"I don't know." Hero admitted. "I think I just need to be somewhere really far away from home. To sort myself out. To think through all the stuff I never got to say to her, and the things that the two of them did. The stuff I'll end up running from again if I don't."

"So if you already had all this planned out, why even bother telling us now?" Aubrey inquired, a tiny hint of emotion bubbling up in her voice. *Anger, probably.*

"I..." Hero stuttered.

"Are you asking us to go with you?" She demanded.

"No." Hero swiftly denied. "I know what I'm talking about doesn't make any sense. It would be a full day of driving just to get out there, and then I'm probably just going to stand around like an idiot." He admitted. Aubrey sighed in response.

"Do mom and dad know you're doing this?" Kel asked.

"Of course not."

"Does Polly know that you want to borrow their car for that long?" Aubrey inquired.

"It was one of the first things I asked her." Hero stated.

...

*"Sorry. I need to use the restroom."* Aubrey stated, hastily standing up from the booth and beginning to move towards the hallway at the end of the dining area.

"I also need to go." Kel robotically doubled her claim with a somewhat-concerned look on his face, awkwardly scooting to the end of the circle so he could follow Aubrey out. The eldest boy was left at his oversized table alone.

Hero stared at the miserable, clouded reflection of his eyes drifting back from the glass in front of him. They were both right to to think he was crazy, but this was all he could do for her.

*Something had to change.* ***He*** *had to change.*

---

Aubrey quickly walked out of the dining area, dodging waiters and patrons, trying not to make eye contact with anyone as she made her way towards the restrooms. She felt like she was going to cry, but wasn't entirely sure why. Something about all of this was too overwhelming.

*It must have been the look on his face.*

Hero had always been the most level-headed in the group. Someone that they had all counted on, even Mari. Aubrey had spent so long around everyone else that Hero had started to feel

like family to her. She didn't have any siblings of her own, but that's what Hero started to feel like. *An older brother she could look up to.*

That must have been why she couldn't take seeing him like this. It was the fact that he just came across as so... *broken,* now. Finding out the truth about Mari had shattered Hero all over again. The only difference this time is that he'd been trying to hide it.

*If Hero couldn't move on from this, then what did that mean for her? What did that mean for the peace she had been trying to find for so long? Was this just what her life was like?*

She was just going to be this sad and angry... *forever?*

Aubrey pushed her way into the women's restroom with her shoulder. Luckily, she had the space to herself. There was no one standing by the sinks, and the stalls appeared empty. The pink-haired girl stared at her reflection in the mirror and grit her teeth. Aubrey choked back a sob.

She was roughly a half-second into her breakdown before the restroom door opened again. A tall, tan-skinned individual with hairy legs abruptly entered behind her.

"Wh- *What the hell are you doing??!"* Aubrey spat at Hero's brother.

"Sorry, I just need to talk to you really quick-"

"Kel, this is the **women's** bathroom-"

"I know-" Kel started.

*"Oh, you know?"*

"Yeah? I-"

***"Then get the hell out of here!!"*** Aubrey hissed.

Kel frowned. "I thought you were a rebel now?"

*"What??!"* Aubrey replied, taken aback.

"I just... need to talk to you for a second." He clarified once more.

"Then wait outside!"

"Geez Aubrey, calm down! There's no one else in-"

"**Fine**! What do you want? *What?"* Aubrey spat, trying to rush her friend through whatever idiotic shit he was about to ramble about so he could get the hell out of the wrong restroom.

"I think we should go with him." Kel said, straight-faced. "One last trip."

Aubrey knew it was coming.

"*But its insane!*" She argued. "There isn't even a point in going! Wherever this place he's talking about is, there's going to be absolutely nothing out there for any of us."

"But Mari-"

Aubrey cut him off. "If you think this is going to change anything for him, you're wrong. Fulfilling her last wishes or whatever isn't going to make him feel any better." She exhaled.

"You don't know that." Kel argued, frowning.

"Yes I do." Aubrey plainly stated. "Even if we came back home and both of them had magically come back to Faraway safe and sound it wouldn't change anything."

"Do you really believe that?" Kel asked.

*"Yes."*

"So if I tell him I want to go with him, you won't come with us?" Kel tried one more time.

"Shut up, Kel. Of course I'm going." Aubrey growled.

"I just think that right now we should all stick- *wait, really?"*

"Of course I'm going!! Do you think I would even be able to sleep at night back home knowing you two are going on some botched camping trip over literally *nothing?"*

"..."

"So are you happy now?" Aubrey hissed.

Kel scratched his nose. "I mean, yeah-"

***"THEN GET OUT OF HERE!!"***

Aubrey's stomach nearly jumped into her throat as the restroom door began to swing open. A middle-aged woman walked in and raised an eyebrow upon seeing that one of the two people standing in front of the mirror seemed a bit out-of-place.

Aubrey's brain nearly overheated trying to generate some kind of instantaneous justification for what was happening so Kel wouldn't end up getting himself escorted out of the restaurant.

But the other patron just smirked with an amused look on her face. "Did you get lost, young man?" She jokingly inquired while making her way towards one of the stalls in the back.

"N-No ma'am! I'll just, uh-" Kel attempted to quickly slide out of the restroom but only came face-to-face with a second woman who seemed much less amused judging by the clearly-visible shock on her face.

"Oops uh, Sorry! I went into the wrong bathroom, haha! *Excuse me-"* Kel gave an awkward smile and quickly scooted his way around her to make an exit.

Aubrey quickly stepped into a stall of her own so she could escape this unwanted experience before she was forced to watch it escalate any further.

After about a minute spent composing herself following that nightmare, Aubrey unlocked the stall door and stepped back towards the mirror. The smiling lady from before was washing her hands, seemingly having paused by the hand dryer to adjust her makeup or check her purse.

Aubrey tried to wash her hands in silence and not draw any more attention to herself, but despite her best efforts the woman glanced over anyway.

"Your boyfriend?" She inquired.

"No ma'am." Aubrey scowled, unsure why she was suddenly acting polite but somewhat afraid not to.

The woman smiled again. "A concerned friend, then?"

The pink-haired girl exhaled through her nose. "Yes, ma'am."

"I love your hair, by the way." The woman stated.

Aubrey's mouth tried to smirk but only barely managed it. She sighed internally as it finally turned into a weak smile.

*"Thank you, ma'am."*

---

*Aubrey and Kel both returned to the table at about the same time. Hero felt a bit embarrassed about how difficult he had made this conversation for everyone, even though he couldn't*

*really think of another way it could have gone. He cleared his throat and prepared to apologize before either of the others felt like they had to say anything.*

“I’m sorry that I dragged you guys along with all of th-“

“So when are we leaving?” Aubrey cut him off, very-obvious irritation audible in her voice.

“When are we… *what?”* Hero scratched his head.

“When are we leaving on your trip and how long is it going to take? I need to see if I can get Kim to take care of my rabbit for however many days this is going to be.” Aubrey demanded. Kel nodded enthusiastically.

“I mean..." The older boy trailed off. "You guys really don’t have to-“

*“Shut up, Hero...”* Aubrey muttered.

Hero sunk backwards into his seat, sweat building on his forehead. “I was uh, going to leave tonight, actu-“

Aubrey scowled. “*Really?* You could have at least given us a heads up.” She complained. Hero's brother smirked.

“What kind of music do you guys want me to bring?” Kel offered. Aubrey groaned.

Hero sheepishly chuckled for a moment before recomposing himself.

“Are you guys… **sure?**” Hero inquired, deadly serious.

“*Sure you’re an idiot*...” Aubrey muttered into her coffee, sending Kel into a fit of laughter.

Hero’s brother stopped quickly, though. “Yeah, bro. We’re sure.”

Hero smiled sadly, a somber warmth bubbling up in his chest. He wasn’t really sure what to say to that. Aubrey smirked once she took notice of his visible embarrassment.

Kel stretched his arms and legs back out again, seemingly reclaiming his title as king of the booth.

Kel yawned. *“Glad that’s all settled."* He said. "Now when is our food going to get here?”

# Her Final Trip Pt. 2

Chapter Notes

I promise that the cursed cameo in this chapter does not become a recurring theme. Thanks for reading.

*If not for the dim evening lights being released into the air from the houses in their neighborhood it would be nearly pitch black outside. The inky blackness brought on by a new moon obscured the world around them as Hero and his brother snuck once again to their borrowed vehicle, this time under the cover of night.*

It was rather difficult to make out her form in the shadows, but it appeared as if Aubrey had already arrived before the two of them. She sat on the curb outside Basil's house and stared off into the trees as the brothers slowly approached. Hero wondered what she had said to her mother before leaving all of a sudden, if anything.

Hero had left an envelope behind on the kitchen table explaining the situation to their parents, although it did not state outright where him and Kel were actually going. He had to assume that mom and dad at least knew *something* was going on considering how much time their sons had mysteriously spent "catching up" with one another out of the house for the past two days, but neither of them had said anything yet. Maybe they were still just giving Hero and his brother some space because of everything that had happened.

Hero had hope that his parents would understand why the two of them were leaving like this... even if he knew his mother would be disastrously upset about what they were doing. Hopefully she would be calmed down by the time the three of them got back in a few days.

There wasn't really that much punishment which Hero's mother could force on him now that he was an adult, but he still felt bad about upsetting her. Hero tried to underline the fact that this trip was entirely his own idea, and even claimed to have strung his friends along with him. He hoped that if he framed the situation in that way his mother might not be too upset with Kel.

Kel was the one who was still going to be staying with their parents once summer finally ended, after all. Hero could make his escape from the brunt of any oncoming matriarchal consequences, but his brother would remain trapped in Faraway.

But despite how much trouble the two of them were about to be in, Kel still seemed to be in very high spirits about their questionable escape. Hero could hear him as he snickered slightly in the shadows, appearing to take some amount of pleasure in the childish secrecy of their midnight operation. Hero almost felt like Kel was having a bit too much fun... but at least he appeared to be handling this event a bit better than his older brother. Hero adjusted

the bag over his shoulder and swallowed, trying to ignore the guilt he felt for allowing his friends to tag along with him at all. *This was such a stupid idea.*

Kel silently waved to Aubrey after her head finally appeared to turn in their direction. She waved back from the darkness, albeit with far less enthusiasm.

The three of them stood together in the shadows beside Basil's family car. "Got everything you need?" Hero inquired.

Aubrey nodded.

He didn't bother asking Kel, as Hero had to personally assist his brother whenever packing for long trips to ensure that he actually remembered anything essential. Like his toothbrush. Or appropriate clothing. Or deodorant.

The three of them tossed their luggage in the trunk. While Kel was busy sitting on the curb and tying his shoes, Hero quietly asked Aubrey if she had left a note explaining anything to her mom before they left, but she didn't respond. The younger girl just ignored him entirely and slipped her nailbat into the passenger's side door. Hero didn't see why something like that would be necessary for this trip… but he was too distracted to push his questioning any further. Hero sighed and double-checked his pockets for anything he might have forgotten. He honestly wanted to get out of here as fast as possible.

*Basil's house was not a pleasant place to be anymore. All of the good memories Hero created here had been torn to pieces. In this moment, he couldn't help but think that if he rubbed his fingers together he might still be able to feel the sensation of his friend's blood seeping between them. That ambulance siren still echoed in his ears.*

Aubrey climbed in the back of the vehicle while Kel sat down in the passenger's seat. Hero considered knocking on the door and thanking Polly one more time for allowing the three of them to steal this car, but he didn't want to risk disturbing her if she was already asleep. Hero slipped the key into the ignition and flinched as the car sprung to life, paranoid that the moment the headlights were on someone might suddenly catch him and his friends in the act.

*But that didn't happen.* Hero pulled out of the driveway as quietly as possible, and suddenly the three of them were off. Aubrey and Kel stopped speaking in hushed voices now that they were finally on the road. They were only driving for a few minutes before Kel asked Aubrey something that had seemingly set her off, but Hero was too distracted by himself to pay much attention to whatever it was they were arguing about.

Hero had been somewhat worried that Aubrey was in a bad mood because she might have felt pressured to join him and Kel on this trip, but she actually seemed to be doing a lot better than he originally thought. Her and Kel continued fighting, but Hero still caught Aubrey smiling a few times (albeit in a somewhat-sinister way). It was probably hard not to be a little

excited during situations like these. After all, how long had it been since the three of them had done something like this?

*As of now, this trip they were on felt important... even if it might not hold that feeling forever.*

“We should probably stock up on whatever we need before we all end up stuck on the highway.” Hero suggested. Aubrey nodded in agreement. Kel stuck his head out the window like a dog.

They stopped to refill at a gas station on the edge of town. Hero bought a variety of drinks at the corner store (probably more than he should have) but left the snacks to his brother. Aubrey returned from the bathroom, and the three of them were quickly back on the road again with food in hand.

Kel and Aubrey began a surprisingly-civil conversation about a comic book which Hero had never heard of, and both seemed to be hesitantly enjoying themselves. Hero caught himself smiling, too... even if he wasn't entirely sure why.

Hero wondered what Mari would say, if she was in the car with them right now. He wondered if she would crack a smile, or make a joke, or enjoy the cool feeling of the air on a summer night. Even if it was all just pleasant self-delusion, Hero couldn’t shake the feeling that she *was* with the three of them now, closer in this moment now than she had been in years.

For the first time since that horrible day at the hospital, even if it was just for a little while…

*Hero almost felt as if they were going to be okay*.

---

A young boy paces around within solitary confinement, desperate for escape but lacking many options to make his grand exit. Angel had been trapped inside his bedroom.

His horrifyingly cruel older sister had used the executive powers granted to her by their parents to ground him for accidentally karate-chopping their neighbor's vase into the floorboards. This punishment was unfair. He was merely trying to demonstrate the combat abilities he had recently amassed while studying under his master...

Besides, this prison could not even hold him. He had already read all of his comic books, after all. Angel had no choice but to make his escape. He squeaked open his bedroom door,

peering carefully down the hall before making a mad dash out the front door, moving quickly enough that if an angry artist saw him she would have to throw something heavy to have any chance of concluding his sprint. The boy ran away from his home and down the sidewalk, gleefully relishing in his newfound freedom. He couldn't wait to inform his associates about the skillful escape he had just completed.

...

Unfortunately he didn't actually know where any of his friends were, so he decided he would spend some time by himself at their secret hideout. If they weren't there, he would keep the grass warm for them until they returned.

Angel's master had taught him many powerful combat techniques that he had not known of previously, and as part of his continued training the two sparred together in the fields behind Faraway park. Angel's capabilities were steadily increasing, but he still couldn't fully wield the absorbed strength of earth's population the way master could. One day he would be taught those secrets, but for now he was merely a novice at energy manipulation.

And so Angel's solo-training resumed. He was busy practicing his flaming-wing turbo-angel leg sweep when his powerful foot collided with a patch of weak-willed vegetation, the plants snapping helplessly to pieces under the destructive power of his kick.

*Something fluttered out of the bush when Angel kicked it. A tiny piece of paper. Angel blinked in surprise. His foe had spat out some kind of peace treaty.*

He reached forward and quickly picked up the bush's surrender notice. Upon turning the paper over, he was met with the image of a young girl with a bow in her hair, looking down at him from an odd angle. The image made him feel like he was short. He *wasn't* short. He just looked that way because his friends were older than him. Angel hated this angle.

The boy rolled his eyes. Some unfortunate soul had wasted their camera film taking pictures of *girls.* Still, this was something his master might appreciate given his peculiar tastes. Perhaps if properly bribed, his master he might count this as meaningful progress in Angel's ceaseless training. He bowed to the bush to indicate he accepted its strange gift and left the plant to continue its humble existence for another day. and The boy left faraway park and headed towards the supermarket to make his rounds. Dashing across the sidewalk, he reached the doors of Gino's and peeked his head inside. Surely enough, his (now leaderless) friends gathered somberly around a half-eaten cheese pizza, the table remaining mostly silent as the group seemingly chewed in remembrance of whom they were missing.

Angel darted inside and made his way over to the pitiful banquet. His master greeted him as he approached.

"Hello my disciple... I thought your monstrous sibling had confined you to a spectral prison deep within the bowels of the earth?" The Maverick asked him.

"That is correct, master! But I made my daring escape to show you a lost item of particular interest that I have acquired..." Angel advertised, removing the polaroid from his back pocket and handing it to the older boy.

His master squinted at the black-haired young girl smiling happily in the picture. "Ah, this is a lovely young maiden you have photographed, my pupil... a crush of yours, I presume?"

"W-What? *No!* This is just a weird image I picked up outside..." Angel denied.

Mikhael squinted at the girl in the polaroid.

"I can't put my finger on it, but something about this girl looks really familiar..." Angel's master passed the photo to the other side of the table. "Do any of you know this girl?" He asked the pitiful pizza posse.

Vance reached out to pick up the photograph but his sister snatched it up before he had the chance. "Mikhael has you taking creep shots of girls now, Angel? You two make me s-"

Kim's eyes bulged out of her skull as she nearly spat out her drink in shock. Something must have gone down the wrong way because she suddenly held her head to the side of the table in a violent coughing fit.

"Hey sis... you good?" Vance inquired, patting the back of her shoulder. Kim's face shot back upwards.

*"THIS IS AUBREY!!"* She shrieked at the other members of the table.

Vance chuckled. *"What?"* he asked, quickly snatching the photo from Kim's grip while she struggled to regain her breath. He glanced at the photo for a moment before his eyelids widened in surprise. *"Holy shit this IS Aubrey..."* He muttered.

*"What?* No way! Lemme see!!" Angel tried to retrieve his photo back from Vance's hands, but the older boy effortlessly deflected him. Angel continued flailing. Charlie leaned forward in her seat, attempting to snag a look for herself.

"...hey.... it really is...." She mumbled quietly under her breath. Mikhael's eyes widened in shock. Vance pointed at him.

"HAHA! You called Aubrey a lovely maiden!!!" Kim's brother laughed obnoxiously at Mikhael as an expression of horror flashed across the other boy's face.

"***NO!!*** I DIDN'T KNOW..." The boy defended himself. *"... please don't tell her I said that."* He begged, Vance laughing even harder in response.

Kim rocketed upward from her seat and grabbed Angel by the collar of his shirt. *"WHERE DID YOU FIND THIS YOU LITTLE WORM?"* She screeched at him.

"Woah, woah, wait..." Angel struggled against the older girl's grasp.

"**Tell me!!**" She demanded.

"It- it was stuck in a bush by the hideout!" Angel stuttered, attempting to regain control of his clothes from Kim's invasive grip.

"WHERE exactly!?"

"I don't know it was just sitting by itself in the woods!" Angel shielded himself from an oncoming punishment.

"f you're lying I'll throw you in a dumpster and leave you there!" Kim threatened

Vance finally came down from his laughing fit. "I think Angel is being serious this time." He stated. Angel nodded enthusiastically. Kim released him from her inescapable grab and grit her teeth. Vance passed the polaroid back to Angel while she wasn't looking.

Mikhael stood up and leaned in close to Angel's head. He held a twenty in his hands, seemingly trying to conceal the money from the others using the angle of his palm. "My pupil... sell the image to me." He said. "You have no idea how much blackmail potential that item holds..." Angel's master whispered shadowy dealings into his ear.

"HEY! NO WHISPERING!" Kim took note of the image's absence and shouted at them both.

*"Take the bill..."* The Maverick insisted. *"Think of all the rare cards you'll get with this..."*

Kim threw an empty plastic cup at Mikhael's head and it bounced off his skull.

"Hey!" He protested.

"That's not yours! Its Basil's!" Kim asserted.

Angel spent a few moments inspecting the image himself before Kim approached him again and pointed a finger in his face.

"Take the picture and go give it back to that weird lady that Basil lives with." Kim instructed Angel. "*She*... she can give it back to him whenever Aubrey brings those two back..." Kim trailed off. She seemed to take pause for a moment before realizing that Angel was staring at her. **"DO IT!"** She pressed him.

Angel glanced back at his master's face one last time before Kim screeched at him again.

"**GO!!** If I find out you didn't give that back I'll kick your ass!" Kim threatened.

"But-"

*"DO IT OR I'LL TELL AUBREY AND WHEN SHE GETS BACK **SHE'LL** KICK YOUR ASS!!"*

Convinced by Kim's insightful and persuasive arguments, Angel dashed out of Gino's to the sound of the store owner yelling at him that he wasn't allowed to run in there. Angel rubbed his neck. *Why did all the girls in this town have to be so crazy...*

---

After tripping on the wet sidewalk a few times (and dodging a few cars), Angel finally made it to the strange house with all the plants out front. He slowly crept up to the door and gave it a tentative knock.

Angel spent a few moments waiting, but it didn't seem like anyone was exiting the building. He stepped forward and knocked once more.

But despite Angel's patience, the building still yielded no response. It was seeming increasingly unlikely that anyone was going to respond to his knocking.

Angel was just about to call it quits and walk away before the door finally opened.

*A woman appeared. Her eyes were red. She looked like she had been crying. Angel suddenly felt extremely awkward.*

"Uhh... H-Hello ma'am." Angel stuttered. "I think I've uh found something of your- *of Basil's..."*

Angel held out the photo. The woman stepped forward and took the polaroid into her hands. She looked as if she was going to say something, but nothing seemed to leave her mouth. The woman stared at the picture of Aubrey for a few moments before a sad smile slowly overtook her face.

"Thank you, young man. I'm sure he appreciates it." She smiled. "You found this by the park?"

Angel scratched the back of his head. *"How'd you know?"*

The woman didn't respond. She seemed lost in thought.

"Were you a friend of Basil's?" She asked.

"Um... not really." Angel mumbled.

"Of Aubrey's?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Did you know Sunny at all?"

"Just a little."

...

"Sorry, I forgot to ask your name. That was rude of me." The woman suddenly apologized.

"Oh, uh... my name is Angel, ma'am."

"Nice to meet you, Angel. My name is Polly." The woman smiled again. *"Would you mind if I asked you one more question?"*

# Her Final Trip Pt. 3

Chapter Notes

> Here's a series of shorter chapters this time around, with the jump-rope boys finally returning next week (probably).
> It's hard to believe it, but today marks the one-year birthday of this story on Ao3. Feels insane.
>
> As usual, I have been too awkward to respond to comments. Thanks for leaving them anyway. Have a great new years!

“I need to go to the bathroom.” Kel stated.

“This is why I told you not to drink them all at once...” Hero chastised him.

“Yeah but to be fair, I was **really** thirsty.” Hero's brother attempted to argue in his own defense.

“Well I hate to say it, Kel… but I think its going to be a while before we hit civilization again.” Hero admitted.

“Are you for sure?”

Hero smirked. *“I'm pretty sure.”*

“Oh man... but I really gotta go....” The younger boy grimaced.

“Really bad, huh?”

Kel nodded. “Like on a scale of one to ten, where one is 'totally dry' and ten is 'about to flood my pants,' we're at around an eight right n-“

“Hero can you please just get off on the next exit and pull over into the trees so I don't have to listen to Kel talk about pissing himself?” Aubrey interrupted.

“That does sound like the best plan of action right now.” Hero laughed. “Does that work for you, Kel?”

“Yup!”

Hero pulled over at the next exit and drove into a slightly-secluded cutaway. He parked in the gravel next to a patch of woods that was hopefully devoid of any human life. Kel departed the vehicle in a hurry.

Hero yawned. He absentmindedly turned his vision in the direction his younger brother had chosen to head out, and took unwanted note of the fact that Kel had not actually entered the forest, he just stepped behind the first immediate tree and had begun relieving himself at an angle that was somewhat-visible due to the unfortunate strength of the wind. Hero chuckled and sighed, quickly regretting the fact that he had let his mind wander yet again.

Best to forget he ever saw that. Hero turned away and glanced in the rearview, pausing to wink at Aubrey as the current look on her face indicated that she was especially bored. She smirked in return but said nothing.

“Are you sure you don't want to get out and stretch your legs for a minute?” Hero asked.

Aubrey shook her head. “I'm good.”

Hero nodded.

A sudden look of realization passed over Aubrey’s face. "Actually, I might step out for a second just to make a phone call..." The pink-haired girl opened her side door and wandered south back the way they came while fiddling with her phone. Hero watched her walk away for a few meters in the rearview before the receiver was finally held up to her ear. The older boy took a moment to wonder what she might have needed to call about.

A door opened. Kel promptly re-entered the vehicle, immediately pulling Hero back out of his thoughts. "Much better." His brother asserted. "Hey, where's Aubrey?”

Hero gestured backwards with his thumb. "Phone call." He explained. Kel glanced back for a second before turning his head around again.

*"Hmm.* So when are we getting to this place we're going, anyway?" Kel asked, absentmindedly scratching the side of his nose.

Hero smirked. "It's uh... going to be quite a while, Kel. We're not even halfway yet."

Kel rubbed his chin. "Does that mean I should bust out the mixtapes now?"

Hero felt a bead of sweat build on his forehead at the thought of spending the next several hours listening to Kel’s... *unique* musical tastes.

“That's between you and Aubrey." he deflected.

Kel’s eyes narrowed. "She never let me jam, even when we were kids." He complained. "I wonder what kind of music she even likes, anyway."

Hero smiled. "Well Kel, why don't you just ask h-"

As if on que, Aubrey stepped back into the vehicle and swiftly shut the door behind her. She absentmindedly raised her eyes from the phone still lingering in her hands before finally taking note of the two pairs of eyes looking at her.

"What are you both l-“

"Hey Aubrey what kind of music do you like?" Kel immediately cut her off, an obnoxious grin plastered on his face.

Aubrey's eyes instantly narrowed. *"None of your business, Kel."*

"Geez! I was just curious." Kel objected.

Hero smirked. "To be fair, I was curious too."

Aubrey's cheeks reddened very slightly. "Why are you guys suddenly asking about music?" She asked.

"Kel was wondering if he could bust out his mixtapes." Hero explained. Kel nodded enthusiastically.

Aubrey rolled her eyes and ignored Kel. "I say let him. Maybe if his music is on he'll talk less."

"Wow! Rude!" Kel laughed. Hero scratched at his collar and felt another bead of sweat build on his forehead. *Not exactly the outcome he was hoping for.*

But in the end, Kel got what he wanted. The mixtape was inserted into the dash, and everyone in the vehicle was 'treated' to Kel's 'totally epic' basketball game pump-up soundtrack. In all honesty, it wasn't quite as bad as Hero thought it would be. After a few minutes it became easily-tolerable, at the very least. However, Aubrey had noticeably equipped her headphones in a seeming attempt to blockade Kel's intrusive melodies.

Hero's brother glanced towards the back of the vehicle while awkwardly dancing in his seat. "Hey, she isn't even listening!" He complained.

Hero smiled. "It's not like you can force her to appreciate your music, Kel. Some people just have different tastes."

"Yeah, but maybe if she gave it a shot she wouldn't be so gloomy all the time-" Kel threw an empty can of Orange Joe at Aubrey's leg as she sprawled across the backseat. She immediately looked up and glared, removing her headphones from one ear to see what it was that Kel wanted.

*"What?? What's your problem?"* She hissed.

Kel grinned. "Headphones off, Aubrey. This is group jam time and that means participation is *mandatory."* He insisted.

Aubrey rolled her eyes. "I wasn't even listening to anything. I was just using my headphones to try to lessen the ear-grating volume of this horrible garbage you listen to."

Kel howled in protest. "How dare you disrespect these beats??" He shook his head. "If you think your taste in music is so much better than ours, why don't you prove it, huh?"

***"Fine!"***

Hero heard some kind of shuffling in the backseat. He couldn't tell what it was that Aubrey was doing, but her headphones were removed now. Hero could hear a bag being unzipped.

Kel unbuckled himself and leaned closer to see what Aubrey was up to. "Oho, what have you got in there?"

Aubrey pushed Kel away with a palm to the face. She suddenly lunged forward underneath Kel and removed his 'jams' from the dashboard. Aubrey shoved the now-discarded mixtape into Kel's hands and replaced it with her own, unmarked tape.

Aubrey loudly exhaled in obvious frustration before slumping back to her previous position.

Hero smiled and scratched his face, rather surprised that Aubrey was actually choosing to share any of her music with Kel... *or at least he thought she was, but no sound seemed to be coming out of the dash at all.*

"Ha-ha Aubrey, your tape doesn't even feel like playing," Kel mocked.

*"Shut. Up."*

…

"Okay but really, when does it st-"

***"Shut up!"***

*It did start.* A soft few introductory piano notes were played, immediately underlining that the tone of this song was going to distinctively sad. Kel groaned slightly. Aubrey hissed at him once more.

But before their ongoing argument could escalate any further, a sudden change came over the vehicle. The pressing of the piano keys on Aubrey's tape picked up in number and volume. A distinct sense of familiarity slowly took hold of Hero's mind with unflinching precision.

*It wasn't hers. She had never played a song like this, and it definitely wasn't something Hero had heard before... but it still couldn't be more obvious who a song like this would've invoked inside of Aubrey's head. It really did capture that same feeling she created. The gentle piano notes effortlessly passed through Hero's ears, somberly bewitching him. Mari would have loved this.*

*Hero felt his chest ache slightly. He glanced in the rearview at Aubrey, but her head was turned to the window now. She was done talking to them. The look in her eyes made her mind seem farther away than the rest of the world could ever hope to reach.*

*The tone of their trip changed immediately. Kel stopped laughing and teasing. His expression became surprisingly serious, with the gentle melody seemingly getting to him no less than anyone else.*

*About halfway through the song, Kel opened his mouth and quietly spoke towards the window.*

"Well... I guess this is okay, too."

---

*Hero exited the highway and drove through a large town in the foothills. Something about this place almost felt familiar to him, but it was nothing like Faraway. There were hundreds more cars filled with thousands more people, with buildings looming in the distance that were taller than anything you could have found in Hero's hometown. Though in spite of its noisy, bustling landscapes, something about it still struck Hero as distinctly beautiful. The busy suburban roads were rimmed with old oak trees, and rows of red and blue flowers popped out from stone flowerbeds lined with patches of moss.*

*The sun dimmed. Almost-imperceptibly-small raindrops tried to collect on the windshield as Hero and his friends passed under a massive cloud which had been travelling in the heavens alongside them. When Hero gazed into the distance he could see similar masses flying in distinct groups, with each subsequent cloud appearing even more enormous than the last. Gigantic, unfathomably-tall pillars of white which crawled across the sky like flying mountains.*

*It was probably just the soft music that now entranced the vehicle, but Hero felt strangely at peace… if only for a minute or two. The wind pulsing through the trees around them seemed more graceful, somehow. For just a few short moments, all of the scary, unfathomable chaos which lived in this world seemed to dance in rhythm while Hero watched. Every individual moving part of the planet quietly turned into a tiny fraction of something enormous... a beautiful, horrible, tragic play which intended to entrance each of its captive viewers by a*

*combination of sheer force and quiet bravado. And as it turned, every member of earth's grand audience became an actor themselves, whether they wanted to or not.*

*The world continued spinning with a deep, unspoken sense of sadness... and Hero span right along with it.*

---

Aubrey and Hero stood a few feet apart, quietly lingering outside of a highway rest stop. Kel had to run into the restrooms yet again, as his bladder had been consistently abused by caffeinated beverages since their trip began. Aubrey's eyes met with Hero's as she noticed the older boy drifting a bit closer. Hero spoke.

"Hey, Aubrey?"

"Yeah?" She raised her head.

"Thanks."

"For what?"

"For sharing your music with us."

"Um, y-yeah? *No problem."*

Aubrey responded somewhat awkwardly, seemingly caught off-guard for a moment. But Hero noticed that she smiled softly as she turned her head back to her phone. A real smile.

Hero and Aubrey continued drifting about in relative silence for a bit, stretching their legs while waiting for Kel to finish his bathroom trip so they could get back on the road. There was nothing in particular to take note of while they waited, but Hero didn't mind. He wanted to continue enjoying the peaceful feeling aching inside his chest for however long it would last.

Aubrey finally crept back towards Hero after having been silently texting on her phone for a while. Hero snapped his gaze from the distance and glanced at her as she approached.

"Is he okay in there? It's been a while." Aubrey absentmindedly itched at her wrist as she looked back towards the restroom door. The older boy scratched his chin.

"Hmm..." Kel's brother considered it for a moment.

Hero poked his head inside the men's room and called out his brother's name. "**Kel**? You okay in here?"

*No response.* Hero stepped inside as his brow tilted. He lowered himself just enough to check for any pairs of feet visible under the stalls. Nobody here. All siblings absent. *What?*

Hero glanced back at their borrowed vehicle, and noticed that Kel was already sitting inside, seemingly asleep in the backseat.

Hero laughed and gestured for Aubrey to look behind her, which she did. "I guess we just missed him at some point?" Hero thought aloud.

“How did he even slip by unnoticed like that?" Aubrey asked. "It feels like everything he does is always as noisy as possible."

"Maybe it's just because he's tired from being stuck in the car all night." Hero suggested, stretching his back slightly.

"*Oh yeah?* And what about you?" Aubrey said. "Are you really okay to keep driving right now?"

Hero forced a smile and nodded. *"I'm fine.* I just want to get as much driving out of the way as possible before we call it quits for the night, so tomorrow's trip won't be nearly as bad," He explained.

Hero opened the driver's-side door and climbed back inside. Aubrey followed suit beside him and re-clipped her seatbelt. Kel was already snoring loudly.

"If we played his music again, do you think he would even wake up?" Aubrey thought aloud.

"Probably not." Hero smirked.

---

*"You're out of your mind."* Aubrey spat.

"I am not! It's like eating weird, rubbery, tasteless-" Kel argued back.

"Are you doing this just to mess with me?" Aubrey accused.

Hero snapped out of his thoughts while he changed lanes, squinting as he tried to ignore the insistent sunset rays which attempted to obscure his vision. He should definitely have brought shades on this trip. “What are we disagreeing about now?" Hero jokingly inquired, perking his ears back to the topic at hand.

"Kel asked me what the worst vegetables were and he said-“

“Pickles, brussel sprouts, eggplants-“ Kel spoke over her.

“First off, pickles are just cucumbers that have been pickled-“ Aubrey argued.

“Been ***poisoned***-“ Kel corrected.

“Second, how are eggplants in the *‘worst vegetable’* category?”

"You don't like eggplant, Kel?” Hero inquired.

"No way, bro." Kel denied.

"Why are you like this?" Aubrey demanded.

"What about you? What are your worst vegetables?" Kel asked for his older brother's opinion.

"I don't think there are any bad vegetables, Kel.” Hero smiled. "It's all in how one chooses to prepare the-"

Kel rolled his eyes. "Yeah cool thanks for the input doc, I'll be sure to eat more boiled spinach-"

"You should. You're going to give yourself a heart condition eating all the trash that you do." Aubrey criticized Kel again.

"I'll just balance it out by exercising more." Kel folded his hands behind his head.

"That's not-"

"You're off-topic!" Kel cut her off once more. "Worst vegetable ever: **what is it?**"

"How about pickled eggplant?" Hero jokingly suggested with a wink. Kel suddenly started to look genuinely ill.

"Is... *is that a real thing?”* He inquired.

*Aubrey raked her nails downwards across her face.*

---

"Did you have fun today?" Mari asked him as the two of them quietly crept away from the treehouse.

Hero scratched at the side of his face. "What do you mean?" He smiled. "Of course I did."

"Mmm?" Mari hummed with amusement. "I don't know, Hero... you've been looking pretty distracted to me."

Hero felt a bead of sweat trying to build on his forehead. "I have?"

*"Yes you have."* Mari smiled. "Anything you want to talk about?"

Hero took pause for a second, feeling his smile falter a bit. "I'm... not sure, actually."

Mari continued smiling. "Maybe later, then."

...

A few moments were spent walking together in comfortable silence before Mari spoke again.

"Is there anything you'd like to do while everyone else is sleeping?" She inquired.

"Um..."

*"No? Nothing?"* Mari let out a suggestive smirk.

Hero felt heat quickly rising to his face. "C'mon, Mari…" He begged.

"Haha! I'm just joking!" She quickly returned to her previous smile. *"Well, half-joking."*

Hero swallowed and laughed while Mari grabbed hold of his arm and moved herself closer to the boy's side.

The two laughed together for a moment before reaching the sliding door back into his friend's house. Hero pulled the door open and was going to let Mari step inside first, but she paused and turned to look at him, a sudden look of excitement passing over her face.

"Oh, right! I almost forgot!" Mari beamed.

"What?" Hero asked.

"I wanted to let you know that-"

---

**"Hero!!"**

*Someone is yelling.*

***"HERO WAKE UP!!!"***

Hero jolts awake as Aubrey violently prods his shoulder from the passenger's seat. He quickly jerks the steering wheel for a brief instant before realizing what had happened. Luckily, the immediate roadway around them was completely empty. Hero recovers control of the vehicle in seconds and re-centers himself within the appropriate lane.

*"Oh my god-“* Aubrey exhaled, clearly horrified and entirely out of breath.

"I was just uh, resting my eyes-"

*"Really??”* Aubrey coughed.

Kel suddenly sat up in the backseat. “Wait, huh? *I’m awake!* What’s happening?”

Hero laughed nervously, feeling his heartbeat finally start to calm down. "That was really, **really** bad. Sorry about that."

"You were drifting like crazy, then I looked over and your eyes were closed-" Aubrey started

"I really haven't felt particularly tired, so I didn't think I'd just pass out like tha-"

*"Well, you did."* Aubrey let out a half-laugh, half-gasp. "Pull over, Hero.”

"No, it's okay." Hero argued. "I'm wide awake for sure now, heh-"

***"Pull. Over."***

---

Hero stretched his arms as he walked across a swath of cracked asphalt by the side of the empty road. With the surprisingly low number of other vehicles on the highway to cast light in the distance, it had become almost pitch black outside. Without any other signs of civilization nearby to create any additional illumination, the innumerable stars lingering in the skies overhead were now easily visible. Hero stared up at them for a moment before walking back to his friends.

"Sorry about almost killing us." Hero apologized for the tenth time. *Kel laughed. Aubrey smirked.*

The pleasant mood disappeared quickly. Kel’s laugh died much faster than usual. Aubrey’s smirk vanished in an instant. A sudden return to reality seemingly passed over all three of them at the same time.

*Hero’s choice of words could have been better. Aubrey exhaled.*

"Try to sleep for a bit, Hero.” She demanded. "You clearly need it."

Hero sighed internally. "I really don't think something like that could happen again, so-"

Kel shook his head, agreeing with Aubrey. "Nuh uh, bro. You need to sleep at least a little."

Aubrey nodded. "We'll stay outside for a bit while you nap if you think that might help you fall asleep quicker. You can have the car to yourself."

Hero frowned. "*Stay outside and do what?* It's the middle of the night and we're in the middle of nowhere."

"Trust me, I know exactly how to keep Kel occupied." Aubrey claimed. Hero's brow tilted.

"Wait, what does that mean?" Kel frowned, seemingly just as confused as his brother.

"Are you sure?" Hero inquired.

"*Yes.* Go sleep, Hero." Aubrey insisted.

Kel smirked. "G'night bro."

Hero let out a tired smile. "Heh. *Goodnight."*

# Her Final Trip Pt. 4

*Aubrey led Kel to an empty, decimated concrete lot by the side of the road; the kind that might have previously held a power line or some other narrow electrical structure. Tall, uncut grass shoots had begun to spring out of the concrete itself as it slowly wore away and crumbled into chunks over the years. Perhaps due to either erosion or poor placement, the lot had sunken significantly lower than the surrounding area, and the recent rainstorms that the trio had been following must have provided a rather heavy downpour, because the empty space the lot created had completely filled up with liquid that appeared to have drained onto it from elsewhere. Now drenched, it almost looked like a shallow swimming pool, or a giant water feature that had the jets turned off.*

"Cool!" Kel exclaimed. "So we're... *going swimming?"*

*"No."* Aubrey flatly denied. She stepped further down the road until reaching a forested slope. The insects in the air were extremely loud out here.

Aubrey bent down and began picking out stones that had been deposited over time at the bottom of the slope. There were small depressions in the side of the cliff that had formed into tiny creeks and runoffs which slowly deviated cold liquid downwards from a higher elevation.

But as minuscule as they were, those tiny streams still did their job. The mountain stones that lingered within them had been smoothed over long ago by the never-ending cascade of moving liquid. Aubrey began picking out some of the best-looking ones and threw them behind her, somewhere to the side of the empty lot. Kel scratched his head for a moment before joining in, although he didn't seem to entirely grasp what they were doing.

Once a significant assortment of appropriately-sized-and-shaped mountain stones had been assembled, Aubrey began gently kicking them into position so they weren't all too spread apart from one another. It would be easier for them both if all the rocks were collected into the same spot. Aubrey bent down.

Kel watched as she threw the first stone across the empty expanse of water. It skipped a few times in the darkness before plummeting to the bottom of the pool. Since the water was so clear and motionless, you could almost still see the lingering form of the stone at the bottom as it caught just a fraction of the moonlight reflecting off the liquid's surface.

"Bet you'll never get as many skips as me." Aubrey challenged.

Kel grinned in the darkness and threw his first stone. It plummeted into the water after a single bounce.

"Aww."

"Wow, you really suck." Aubrey mocked.

"Rude! We'll just have to see." Kel straightened his back.

---

Kel sometimes grumbled or whistled or exclaimed in response to the competition which they had started, but Aubrey herself remained largely silent. She didn't really have to put much effort in to beat Kel at something like this, and so she often found her mind wandering elsewhere while their mock battle continued.

"So?" Kel suddenly spoke, snapping Aubrey out of her thoughts.

*"So?"* Aubrey repeated back to him.

"Are you having any fun on our trip so far?" Kel continued smiling in the darkness.

Aubrey felt her nose wrinkle as she scowled. "*Am I having fun?* Since when was the point of this trip to ***have fun?"***

"I mean... we're skipping rocks right now." Kel argued.

"Would you rather do nothing?" Aubrey asked. Kel scratched his head.

"Well, you said it yourself, didn't you? You think this whole trip is pointless." He responded.

"..."

"So I was just wondering if you were at least enjoying yourself." Kel finished.

"*Right.* And why do you care?" Aubrey instinctively spat back.

"Geez, I was just asking..." Kel muttered.

Kel's next stone was thrown with notably less energy behind it, but its skipping potential was no higher than before. It just sank quietly after a single bounce.

...

"Sorry." Aubrey apologized.

"Are you just… *like this,* now?" He asked.

Aubrey immediately scowled again. "Am I like *what?"*

"Like... mad all the time?" Kel asked. "Wait, no- I guess you were always mad, even back then-"

Kel snickered at his own conclusion, the prior change in tone vanishing instantly under his own self-amusement.

Aubrey felt her face redden as she grimaced in the shadows. *Why did she even try?*

"...It's just a little less funny, now." Kel concluded laughing, his tone growing somber again... if only by a bit.

Aubrey exhaled through her nose as they continued skipping a few more stones in silence.

"I'm also... sorry." Kel suddenly apologized.

Aubrey took a breath. *"For?"*

"Picking a fight with you while we were at the cathedral back home." Kel explained.

*"Mm?"* Aubrey responded, a bit surprised. "You didn't even pick a fight, really. I was the one who wouldn't listen to anyone."

"Yeah, but we didn't have sneak up on you... *there."* Kel stated.

"..."

*Aubrey could almost still hear the cruel, distasteful whispers and half-spoken speculations emerging from the congregation around her. Their shallow distrust and hatred bubbled up inside her head before quickly fading away again. Kel's continued dialogue snapped her out of it.*

"Did it help?" He inquired.

"Did what help?"

"Going to church. Did it actually do anything?" Kel asked.

...

*"Sometimes."* Aubrey confirmed. "I kept going for a long time, after all."

"Do you think you'll ever go back again?"

Aubrey shrugged. "*Maybe.* Maybe not. It was kind of getting old, anyway."

...

"Maybe you two did me a favor." Aubrey thought aloud.

...

Kel threw an awkwardly-shaped stone that bounced at a strange angle before sinking. The momentary silence between them was filled by the chirping and buzzing of countless insects. Aubrey spoke again.

"Why do you think he even came out?"

*"Out?"* Kel mirrored.

"Sunny." Aubrey clarified. "Why do you think he even chose to leave his house after all that time?"

Kel stared into the distance for a moment and brushed a few hairs out of his face, pausing to think with a rock in his hand.

"He hadn't left in *four entire years.* Why do you think he'd even bother to come out after that long?" Aubrey reiterated it again as she wondered aloud.

"I guess... to say everything he did." Kel concluded, lowering his gaze to stare into the bottom of the pool beneath him.

...

"Yeah." Aubrey agreed. "To spit it all out before he ran away."

...

"I guess." Kel mumbled.

...

"Do you really think they're still alive?" Aubrey asked.

*"Yes."* Kel confirmed without hesitation.

"I had doubted it for a while... but I think you two actually might be right," Aubrey said. "They're both still out there somewhere, and someone else is going to drag them back to Faraway… *eventually."*

"Yeah. I think that, too." Kel confirmed, a faint smile now audible in his voice.

She wasn't entirely sure why, but something about the smirk on Kel's face made Aubrey feel... *angry.* She silently picked up a rock with a triangular edge while a faint buzzing sensation began to build inside her chest. Regardless, Aubrey didn't have time to dwell on the bad taste in her mouth before Kel continued pushing the conversation forward.

"What are you going to do about Basil?" He asked.

Aubrey stopped her arm mid-swing, failing to release the stone which she ended up palming instead. She lightly clenched the object in her fist.

"What are you talking about?" She asked.

A truck blared its horn somewhere off in the distance. Kel waited until it stopped before he continued speaking.

"If they both come back, and Sunny moves away, and Basil is still here with us..." He began.

"Are you asking if me and my friends are going to torture Basil again?" Aubrey replied, a mockingly accusatory tone arising in her voice. "If I'm going to take something nasty out on him?"

"Yeah." Kel confirmed, his expression somewhat difficult to read in the shadows. "I am."

*The stone which Aubrey now held continued digging into her palm as she squeezed it tightly.*

"Oh, really?" The pink-haired girl felt a cruel smirk try to build at the corner of her lip. "And if I decided I *was,* then what would **you** do, Kel? You'd try and stop me?"

"*Yes.*" Kel gave the response she was expecting.

"Why?"

"Because..." Kel hesitated slightly.

*" 'Because we're friends?' "* Aubrey finished his statement for him.

...

"Yeah."

Aubrey clicked her tongue.

...

She sighed through her nose. *"Of course I wouldn't."* Aubrey finally gave an honest response.

Kel glanced in her direction as she spoke.

"Even if part of me wanted to 'punish' them or whatever, what would any of us actually get out of it?"

Kel turned away again and skipped a stone in silence.

"Its not like there's anything I could do to either of them that would bring her back." Aubrey muttered.

Aubrey's next stone skipped silently, barely making any sound at all as it took its brief flight before smoothly descending into the depths.

...

"Is it really that weird of me that... I still want to be friends with Basil?" Kel asked.

Aubrey sighed. "Not really. It's about what I would expect from you."

...

Aubrey was anticipating that Kel would bite back in some way, but to her surprise the boy remained silent.

*"... And Sunny?"* She prodded.

"What?" Kel asked.

"You said you were going to continue being *'pals'* with him too, right?"

Kel hesitated again, but a bit longer this time. When he opened his mouth again, his voice had fallen quiet.

"I think so."

...

"I'm... not entirely sure." He admitted.

Aubrey suddenly fumbled her throw, having been interrupted slightly. That wasn't really what she was anticipating.

"Because... *he did it?"* She asked, not wanting to say anything further than that.

"No..." Kel swiftly denied. "It just felt like... there was still something that he wasn't telling us."

"Like what?"

"I don't know." Kel admitted, his voice unusually small. "I might be wrong. It was just a feeling."

Aubrey quietly hummed in response.

...

"Well, we might never find out, anyway." Aubrey concluded, pushing her hair back.

"That's-" Kel frowned.

*"Alright, I'm up."*

Kel and Aubrey both jumped in unison as Hero approached the two of them from behind.

Hero laughed at their sudden surprise. "You guys skipping rocks?" He inquired with amusement.

"Hero, its barely even been fifty minutes..." Aubrey complained, checking her phone.

"I did pass out for a while, though." Kel's brother stated. "I just kept waking up."

"But-" She started.

"We'll all be able to get some sleep once we reach the next town... and we're close." Hero reassured her. "Let's get back on the road. If I start to doze off again, you can just throw something at me." He confidently grinned. Aubrey narrowed her eyes at him.

After some brief resistance and mild discussion about the road ahead, Kel and Aubrey both hesitantly agreed to keep moving and the two of them began to walk back towards the vehicle.

"Wait, stop for a second." Hero suddenly demanded. Kel and Aubrey froze in surprise. The pair turned back to look at him.

Hero picked up an oval-shaped stone from those which his friends has scattered across the asphalt, and threw it in an elegant arcing motion. The rock effortlessly bounced upon the surface of the water so many times that it almost ended up reaching the other side of the flooded lot and disappearing into the grasses.

"Heh heh." Hero grinned.

*"Showoff..."* Kel complained.

# Her Final Trip Pt. 5

*Both Aubrey and (surprisingly) Kel had asked Hero if he needed them to help pitch-in to pay for their motel room, but he denied it. Hero felt he had it covered. The older brother had to wonder if Kel even had any real funds on him right now.*

A simple two-bed setup was not as expensive as Hero had been expecting, but maybe he should have adjusted his expected price point in accordance to the rather... *humble* location where they had decided to spend the remainder of the night. Hero watched a cockroach run swiftly from the walkway and onto the asphalt. This place was kind of a dump.

Hero shuddered at the sight of the innocuous insect. Maybe they really should have picked somewhere a bit more appealing. He felt bad asking Aubrey to sleep in a place like this… even if he knew she was unlikely to complain at all, given the condition of the house she came from.

Kel probably didn't care even slightly. Hero's younger brother could fall asleep in a dirty patch of wet grass and stand back up as if he just had the most satisfying nap of his entire life. Hero sometimes wished he could do stuff like that.

Hero lifted his gaze into the distance and watched as Kel and Aubrey slowly made their way back to the motel room from across the street. Hero had asked them to check out the fast food location down the road while he handled the housing and their luggage.

They were both a bit too far out to have noticed Hero watching them from the doorway, which might have been acting to his advantage. He noted with some amusement that Kel and Aubrey almost looked like perfectly normal friends when they were walking together alone. If they were both given a shared task to accomplish, it often seemed as if the two of them could get along... *only for that temporary ceasefire to crumble away the moment their quest was complete.* But for this brief second, their amicable truce is still visible. Rare moments like this were meant to be appreciated.

Kel swung his arms jovially as he walked, paper bags filled with (likely very unhealthy) fast food items flopping around as they hung from his palms. Aubrey didn't appear to be nearly as enthusiastic as his brother, but it was still nice to see her without a miserable scowl on her face.

'Not fighting constantly' wouldn't have been a particularly high bar to clear between most friends, but for a pair like Kel and Aubrey... Hero had to enjoy the tiny instances of progress when and where he could find them. Hero smiled.

*He wished Mari was here to enjoy this view with him.*

"Get me anything good?" Hero asked his brother, letting out a wink and an obnoxious grin.

"I got you a fish sandwich." Kel stated. "But there's a ton of burgers too-" He rubbed the side of his face against one of the bags as if it were his long-lost child.

"He bought too much." Aubrey complained.

"It's fine!" Kel defended himself. "Now we have dinner and breakfast for tomorrow morning."

"That depends on how much you plan on eating." Hero joked.

"I don't plan." Kel stated with utmost seriousness. "My stomach makes the calls, I just follow his direction."

The three of them sat at a metal picnic table that had been set up beside a small children's play area behind the motel grounds. All the equipment looked as if it hadn't been touched in ten years, the rusty jungle gym in particular seeming as though it would probably fall apart under the smallest breath. But even if it wasn't such a mess, Hero was unsure what kind of parent would actually bring their child to a place like this.

Kel dumped the contents of his first bag all over the table. Wrapped and boxed sandwiches violently toppled everywhere.

"Dinner is served." He claimed.

"Can you even call this dinner anymore?" Aubrey asked. "We're eating in the middle of the night."

"Yeah, isn't it great?" Kel replied. "But man, some ghost town around here, huh?" Hero's brother stated, swinging his head from side to side.

Hero turned his gaze further down the road they had come in on, taking note of the enormous glow in the distance which they had yet to reach.

"The town itself seems pretty big, it looks like we're just right on the edge of it." Hero thought aloud.

"How much longer until we get where we're going?" Aubrey asked. "I swear that the hills around here just keep getting taller the further we go."

"We're really close. We got a lot more driving done today than I thought we would." Hero stated, watching Kel violently inhale a sugary beverage in-between his passionate burger assaults.

"What are we going to do when we get there?" Kel asked with his mouth full.

"I'm open to ideas." Hero admitted. "You guys want to go sledding?"

"I still can't believe you're asking us if we want to go sledding in the *middle of summer."* Aubrey complained.

"Is that a no?" Hero asked with a wink. Aubrey rolled her eyes.

"It just seems a bit easier than trying to learn how to ski on such a short notice." He joked.

"Ask me again once these supposed *'white peaks'* show up..." Aubrey turned her head to the other boy. "*God,* didn't anyone ever teach you to chew your food?"

*"Mhgmph Fgmph!"* Kel argued in his defense.

Hero pulled a folded piece of paper from his shirt pocket. "I made a list of all the things that I knew Mari wanted to do with us... but it isn't really a long list." He admitted. "And I doubt I have the funds for an 'overnight cabin experience.'" He nervously smirked.

"We could just drive the car up the side of a mountain and sleep!" Kel suggested. "That's basically like a cabin, right?"

Hero smiled. "Maybe?"

---

*The younger boy yawned loudly and stretched himself out on him and his brother's now-shared mattress. A two-bed setup meant the obvious: Hero and Kel were going to be sharing one bed, while Aubrey could keep the other for herself. Hero moved his body slightly to avoid Kel's wandering foot.*

Aubrey walked back into the bedroom while drying her hair with a towel. "The bathroom is actually a lot nicer than the rest of this place if either of you needed a shower."

Kel shrugged. Hero nervously thumbed through his call history. His phone had been left on mute ever since their dubious trip began the previous night.

“I'm surprised you're even still awake, Hero…” Aubrey thought aloud. *"... Is your mom mad?"* She inquired, seemingly taking note of his obvious mental preoccupation.

Hero slowly shook his head. "It's, uhh.. a problem for another time. *Heh."* He faked a laugh. "But I should probably call her back at least… just to let her know we're both okay..."

"Come on, Hero!” Kel complained. "This is the one real act of rebellion I've ever seen you take in your life, at least live it up a little!" He grinned.

"So you're saying you aren't afraid of what mom is going to do to us when we get back?" Hero asked.

Kel scratched the side of his nose with a deadpan smile. "I didn't say that."

"I should at least... text... *uh..."* Hero trailed off.

"I mean you did leave a note, right?" His brother asked.

"Yeah!" Hero confirmed. "And I'm sure dad will understand why we..."

"Yeah, dad will have our backs for sure." Kel confirmed with desperate enthusiasm. "Besides-"

"It's summer break." Hero finished his statement. “S-She can't be mad about a little trip on summer break... I'm an adult, and you're-"

"Pretty much an adult, right?" Kel grinned.

*"Right!"* Hero confirmed. "And its only been a day, so its not like she's going to think we're dead if we don't text her back."

"Exactly." Kel agreed. "We're **not** dead."

"But if we don't respond she might think something bad happened…" Hero bounced back.

"Uhh..."

"Maybe I should just-"

"Okay, I'm taking this." Aubrey stepped forward and forcibly pulled the phone out of Hero’s nervous hand with her fingers.

"Hero. *Sleep."* She demanded.

# Her Final Trip Pt. 6

*The rotating ceiling fan spun loudly.*

"I, uh… can't sleep."

Hero finally spoke into the darkened space around him, feeling a bit embarrassed. Kel shuffled around on the other side of the bed. Aubrey audibly sighed from across the room.

"Me neither." She grumbled under her breath. *"It smells weird in here..."*

"I bet I can count more sheep than you guys." Kel joked, his voice far too loud for someone who was just supposed to be sleeping a second ago. "One, two, thr-"

Aubrey threw a crumpled-up bag at Kel's head. It ended up hitting Hero instead as her aim was considerably impaired by the darkness.

"Ooh! So close!" Kel laughed and threw a pillow in return. The corner of the fabric grazed Hero's nose as it flew by his face. Aubrey ducked and it spun right past her before hitting the wall.

"Can you two please leave me out of your crossfire?" Hero requested.

Aubrey ignored them both. "Do you guys care if I turn the lamp on?"

"I don't mind."
"Go ahead."

The bedside lamp is turned on. Hero was expecting to have his vision bombarded by a painful outburst of bright light, but the lamp's glow was actually so dull that it almost felt as though Aubrey had simply lit a candle instead.

"Wow, this lamp *sucks."* Kel joked, sitting upright.

"Maybe the bulb is broken." Hero suggested. "I guess it *is* kind of relaxing this way, though."

...

“Do you guys want to tell each other scary stories?” Kel suggested. “I’ll go first-“

“Yeah, no thanks.” Aubrey interrupted.

“Aww…”

…

Hero rubbed his eyes. He didn’t feel much like continuing to try and sleep himself, but he still wondered why Aubrey had wanted to turn the lamp on in the first place.

Hero glanced over at Aubrey. She was silently staring down at her hands. Hero expected his brother was going to continue joking around after Aubrey shot down his storytelling pitch, but Kel was keeping unusually quiet as well.

Hero slowly got out of bed and took a seat in the desk chair across the room. He thumbed around in the cooler which they had been storing their drinks in, but didn’t end up actually removing anything. He silently wished they had picked up a few more bottled waters and a few less caffeine-loaded citrus beverage cans.

...

After a few brief moments spent lingering within a rather tense silence, Aubrey finally spoke again.

“Do you guys want to talk about why you couldn’t sleep?”

Hero quietly sighed through his nose. It wasn’t particularly hard to guess why the three of them were having difficulty unwinding. Now might have finally been the right time to talk about... *everything.* They had to. Kel was right. The longer they kept putting this off, the more painful it was going to end up being.

Both Hero and his brother seemingly hesitated to speak their minds, so Aubrey continued.

“Kel was talking about this earlier, but I think it didn't really dawn on me until just now..." Aubrey started. "What if we go home after all this and they both really are just... *back again."*

“You mean if they came back on their own?” Hero asked.

*“I mean if they came back at all.”* She stated, staring at the wall. “It’s funny… we’d been looking for them all this time… but I had only just started to get used to the idea that I was finally through with them both.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever be able to see either of them the same way I did before.” Hero admitted. “Even if I somehow found a way to accept..."

*"... what they did.”* He finished.

“And what about me?” Aubrey asked, her voice suddenly much colder.

“What about you?” Hero replied, confused.

"I'm not any different from Sunny." Aubrey plainly stated. “I knew Basil couldn't swim, and I pushed him anyway. I didn't even think about it."

...

“That’s not…” Hero trailed off. He wanted to reassure Aubrey that what she was talking about wasn't the same, but the words failed to form in his head.

...

"It felt so… *reflexive.”* Aubrey spoke again, her voice having dropped significantly in volume.

Hero and his brother listened silently.

“I just wanted him away from me, you know? I didn't mean..." She bit her lip.

"Hero." Aubrey paused.

"Yeah?" Hero replied.

"If you hadn't shown up when you did, then Basil probably would have died."

...

"Maybe." Kel agreed.

...

Hero suddenly felt a wave of indescribable, inescapable nausea. Something in his stomach slowly contracted. The room seemed to tilt sideways for a moment. He didn't even want to think about how something like that would have effected Aubrey... *or his brother.*

...

"What would either of you have done, if you were them?" Aubrey asked, her voice gentle but devoid of emotion. "If you were just a kid and that happened."

Kel shook his head, expression empty.

"I have no idea." Hero admitted, feeling his life slowly draining out of him. *"I can barely even imagine it."*

"I've been thinking about it over and over and over again but I never find an answer." Aubrey spoke. "I just keep... seeing him sink to the bottom of the lake."

...

"No matter how hard all of this has been for us, it's been so much worse for them, hasn't it?" Aubrey continued. “And no matter how much I want to hate them for it..."

...

"I just... *can't."*

…

"Me neither." Hero admitted.

Kel remained silent.

*"But I'm still so, **so** angry."* Aubrey whispered.

...

"Maybe they wanted to tell us earlier." She wondered aloud. "But one couldn't spill the secret without the other... and since none of us ever talked again, they never did."

"I don't know." Hero muttered.

“What the hell happened with Basil that he could even think...“ Aubrey started but then stopped herself again.

*"Just talking about this makes me feel disgusting."* She admitted.

"Do you either of you think that if we had tried to talk to them sooner, maybe things could have been different?" Kel asked.

*Hero considered saying something to his brother, but Aubrey spoke first.*

"I don't know. Four years is a long time, Kel." Aubrey spat, venom suddenly arising in her voice. "Four years they let us believe that she left us. Four years I'm never going to get back." The younger girl sat up and looked down at herself as she continued.

"Four whole years I spent wondering *'Was it me?' 'Did I do something wrong?'"* Aubrey's arms trembled.

"'If I had just been better, or listened to her more, or acted like less of a child, then would it have been different? Would she have stayed with us?'"

*Hero felt bile try to crawl into his throat.*

Aubrey stood up from the bed, her voice continuing to rise in volume. She walked towards the bathroom as she spoke. Kel returned to his previous silence. Hero tried to hold himself steady, but he felt Aubrey's lonely suffering slowly seeping into him as she mindlessly ranted to herself.

"**Over** and **over** I asked myself whose fault it was! Had she just been miserable the entire time? Did she secretly hate us for having so much fun while she was struggling like that? *While she was in pain?"*

"What would have had to change for things to be different? *Was it us? Were none of us good enough?"*

Aubrey covered up her face with her palms as an empty laugh slowly began to escape her lungs. *"Haha! Hahaha!"*

Her hopeless mania echoed through the room before fading away almost as quickly as it had begun. For a few empty moments, Aubrey only stared at the wall in front of her.

Kel looked at Hero, visibly nervous. Hero felt like he needed to say something... *but he couldn't.* He understood exactly how Aubrey felt. The two brothers watched silently as Aubrey slowly came back down again.

"I thought she had left us all behind. I thought she had left **me** behind." Aubrey trembled with rage. "I even started feeling angry towards her... when I should have been angry towards **them**."

Aubrey quietly walked back to her bed and slowly sat down on the end of the mattress, hair now hanging in tangles over her face.

*"That entire day… just talking with us... we even went to the old treehouse…"* She mumbled to herself, breathless.

Hero continued his pitiful attempt to come up with a single comforting word he could let slip past his tongue, but he eventually realized that even if he succeeded it would have been an obvious lie. If Hero had any idea how to ease someone through this, then the three of them wouldn't have even been out here in the first place. He opened his mouth for a moment, but only managed to close it again. Kel laid completely still.

...

Aubrey’s voice crept into the air once more, but it barely seemed to lift off the ground this time. A tiny, fragile question left her lips.

*"Did either of you ever... think about following Mari?”*

"Sometimes." Kel responded almost immediately, not removing his gaze from the ceiling.

Aubrey suddenly turned to glance at Hero. He glanced back, their eyes meeting for a moment. She initially seemed surprised as she searched Hero's face, but eventually her eyelids lowered and her gaze returned to the ground.

"Me too..." She mumbled.

...

*"... All the time."*

Hero felt a lump building in his throat. He stared at the floor and waited for a moment, expecting that Aubrey would say something more after a few seconds had passed. After those few seconds passed by in silence, he lifted his head again... *and found that both Aubrey and Kel were now staring in his direction. Waiting.*

Hero exhaled through his nose and felt the beginnings of two tiny tears trying to build in the corners of his eyes.

"Yeah." He admitted. *"I did."*

...

Aubrey's lip trembled slightly. She ran the tips of her fingers through the strands of pink hair which rested on her shoulder. Kel turned back to the ceiling again.

...

He could feel something gently starting to turn within his head, so Hero finally began to speak.

"After she was gone, I started missing all the little things about her that I never even thought about while she was here. Things I barely even noticed when she was with us. The jokes she

made, the words she used... all the stuff she did for us when we weren't even paying attention."

...

"It felt like... I got cut apart from the inside out." He admitted. "Like she took some part of me with her when she left, and that part is never going to come back again."

"I thought I had finally gotten used to the idea of living my life without her... but I didn't." Hero pondered aloud. "I just pushed her into the back of my mind so I wouldn't have to see her anymore. I wonder if she would hate me for that."

"I just... wanted her to be proud of me. Of us."

Hero paused.

"I miss the cookies she made." Kel spoke. "And the way she laughed... and how she'd scratch the back of my head if she was next to me."

"I miss how she'd get mad.... whenever I did something stupid." Hero's brother admitted. "How she'd shake her finger at you. Remember that?"

"I miss how she'd always try to teach us how to make things." Aubrey joined in. "Even if we never listened."

"I miss how she'd always show me the way to get the stains out of my pants." Kel scratched his face.

"Kel..."

"I miss how invincible she always made herself look, with her hands on that grand piano..." Hero began. "... only for her to get embarrassed by the tiniest details in her performance. I'd always try to talk her out of those moments, but she'd never listen to me." Hero smiled sadly.

"Mari lived by her own rules." Aubrey confirmed, smirking to herself.

...

"I miss... *listening to her hum to herself while I fell asleep in the grass."* Kel quietly mumbled.

Aubrey let out a soft sigh.

...

"I can't know for sure... but I think she would be proud of us." Hero asserted. "For coming back together the way we have, at least."

...

"I hope so." Aubrey mirrored. "Because it sure doesn't seem like any of us know what the hell we're doing."

*Hero let out an exhausted chuckle.*

The motel room finally returned to silence.

"Do you guys care if I play my music again?" Aubrey requested. "It helps me sleep."

"I don't mind." Hero stated. Kel brother shook his head.

Aubrey turned her headphones outward and placed her cassette player on the bedside table. The audio quality was quite poor when listening like this, but no one in the room seemed to mind. The soft piano notes felt almost desperate when listened to in such a humble way, but each of them were enchanting nonetheless.

Hero returned to bed and laid back down next to his brother. Aubrey flicked the light off once again.

No one talked anymore. They didn't need to. Maybe it was just his imagination, but the shared silence between Hero's friends seemed to speak more clearly to him than words ever could.

*Something enters the young man's head. Hero didn't say it, and barely thought it, but he still* ***felt*** *it. A somber sense of loss overwhelmed him. His emotions remained painful, confusing and twisted... but Hero couldn't shake the feeling that there were two other friends who should have been experiencing this moment alongside them.*

# Accomplice

*Polly had spent all morning searching. Their family's house had already been sold. She had seen the furniture being taken out herself. There was no way Polly was going to find Sunny's family there... but the boy's mother had to be somewhere close. She had to be somewhere in Faraway.*

Polly returned to the hospital to ask if any of the staff knew where that woman was staying. Ms. Suzuki **must** have visited her son in the hospital on more than a few occasions, Polly just hadn't run into her.

Unfortunately, Polly came up empty handed. None of the nurses could help her, but it likely would have been unprofessional of them to reveal information like that even if they somehow knew.

*So she kept looking.* Polly asked if they knew which local accommodations were situated closest to the hospital itself and wrote down a list. If that woman had been worried about her child's wellbeing after what Basil had done to him, these few locations would have been the closest she could've stayed to Sunny without having to sleep in a hospital room... *as long as she wasn't currently housed with family or friends.*

It felt like a shot in the dark, but Aubrey's gang had seemed to believe that Sunny and his mom lived alone. It was very much possible that Ms. Suzuki was currently isolated somewhere in Faraway. The disappearance was still recent, after all. There was plenty of reason to believe that those two boys would eventually return on their own.

...

But with her own vehicle still in the hands of Basil's friends, Polly had no choice other than to ride along on public transit. Luckily, she was rather used to it, and Faraway itself was not a particularly large town.

After some time spent trying to locate her way around on foot from the last bus stop, Polly finally reached the final building in question. Her list had almost been checked. If the person she was searching for couldn't be found in this hotel, then her search would likely end up fruitless.

---

"Can I help you, ma'am?"

*A young man politely asks Polly if she needs assistance. She turns to him and smiles.*

"Yes, sorry... could you please call Ms. Suzuki down to the lobby for me?" Polly requests. "I was supposed to meet her an hour ago but I got a bit lost around town..."

"Oh no! I'm sorry to hear that, ma'am. Just give me a moment and I'll check my ledger."

*This was the fifth time today that she had pulled her trick. The distinction was simple, but effective.*

If Polly were to straightforwardly ask a hotel if a specific patron was staying with them, then she would be swiftly denied that information on the basis of 'client privacy.' But if Polly were to ask to speak to a specific guest by name (acting as if she were already sure of the other person's presence) then unless that guest had specifically requested to receive no calls, the hotel staff would invariably attempt to patch her through. *It seemed that 'client privacy' was more a moral obligation than a legal one.*

Polly nervously rubs her thumb against the palm of her hand while she waits for the receptionist to speak again. She looks around the lobby. It appeared to be largely empty, with very few people moving from place-to-place at this time of day.

Polly took a quiet breath. She was prepared for this to be a waste of time. In all likelihood, the receptionist was simply going to thumb around for a moment, come up empty handed, and then apologize that they were unable to find any guest with that moniker. Polly would then fake confusion, state that she must have somehow ended up at the wrong hotel, and quietly make her exit. One final rinse and repeat.

*But to Polly's amazement, this time was different. Her eyes widened slightly as she watched the receptionist press a few buttons and then speak into his receiver.*

"Ms. Suzuki, you have a visitor asking for you in the lobby."

*Found you.*

A few moments of silence pass before the receptionist places the receiver back down again.

"I'm sorry ma'am, she didn't pick up. She does not seem to be in at the moment."

Polly let out a breath. That figured. She considered the optics of sitting down by the window and waiting for her target's eventual return… *was that creepy?*

"Oh... that’s very alright, thank you." Polly fidgeted, trying not to seem surprised. "Can you point me in the direction of your restrooms, please?"

“Past the dining area, first door on your right.” The young man smiled and gestured.

“Thank you.”

---

Polly turned the corner and stepped into the women’s restroom. It was quite a bit dirtier than she was expecting. For a chain hotel, this place did not seem to be holding itself to the highest standards. *Gross.*

Polly tried to ignore the slightly-discomforting chemical smell that was lingering in the air and just focus on finishing her business as quickly as possible. She washed her hands and spent about fifteen seconds trying to dry them before it became apparent that the air dryer was not in service. She settled for a paper towel instead and then headed back out into the lobby.

Polly turned the corner again. The receptionist was on the phone once more, quietly talking to someone about available rooms and amenities. Nothing noteworthy.

...

Except there was someone new standing at the end of the lobby, lingering a few feet across from the front desk. A woman with short black hair stared out the window with a somewhat worried expression on her face. Polly quietly watched her as she stared out the window and nervously played with her hands as if agitated by something. The woman's eyes were held open just wide enough to suggest a mild sense of… *fear.*

Her hair was an absolute mess, she didn’t appear to be wearing any makeup, and her clothes were unkempt. If Polly didn’t recognize those tired eyes, then she would have never been able to identify this woman. *But it was definitely her.*

Polly takes a moment to steel her nerves before clearing her throat and speaking to the woman from behind.

"Ms. Suzuki?"

The woman jumps and turns quickly in surprise before staring Polly in the face with a look of intense confusion. That shock lasts only a moment before her expression swiftly readjusts to one which Polly found far more familiar.

*The woman's eyelids lower. Her expression deadens. Whoever Ms. Suzuki was hoping to see visiting her today, Polly was definitely not that person.*

“H-Hello!” Polly nervously stuttered, somewhat caught off-guard by the instantaneous change in her demeanor. “I apologize for bothering you ma'am, I was just wondering if I could talk to you for a momen-“

The black-haired woman did not even wait for Polly to finish her sentence before casually walking past her as if she was not even there. Ms. Suzuki silently crept through to the other end of the lobby and then turned into the hall.

Polly froze in surprise for a moment before swiftly recomposing herself and following after her escapee. She couldn't let her vanish so easily after all of this effort.

“Wait, please! May I talk to you for just a second?” Polly insisted.

Ms. Suzuki continued walking away in silence. Her unwitting pursuer awkwardly sped-walk behind her until they were roughly side-by-side before speaking again.

“My name is Polly... I'm so sorry to bother you at a time like this, I was just wondering if I could ask you a few questions? I promise it wouldn't take lon-”

Ms. Suzuki began walking faster. The pair passed a young couple in the hallway who both gave them somewhat-discomforted looks as Polly continued her awkward pseudo-chase. The caretaker quieted down for a moment as they passed the other hotel guests before speaking up again.

“You already know me though, don’t you?" Polly mumbled. "Have I met you somewhere before? I know we’ve seen each other around-“

The other woman only walked even faster. Polly was half-expecting her to attempt an elevator escape, but Ms. Suzuki simply continued speed-walking down the hall in complete silence. This wasn't working.

“I’m sorry…” Polly apologized. “I know my son did something terrible to-“

*Polly stopped herself.*

*“Well, not- I meant I’m caretaker… Basil’s-“*

Polly awkwardly tripped on her words after unintentionally referring to Basil as her son. She felt a sudden surge of embarrassment promptly rush into her face. Regardless, Ms. Suzuki just kept walking.

*The longer this went on, the worse Polly felt. This was extremely inappropriate. This woman had just lost her child. Of course she was not in the mood to speak to Polly or anyone else.*

Sunny’s mother stopped abruptly at the final door on the left and unlocked it without turning to look at Polly. Her hands trembled slightly.

“I promise Basil isn’t a bad kid. I really don’t know why he would do something like that b-but-“ Polly fumbled her line again. She wasn't sure what she was even saying anymore.

*Ms. Suzuki opened the door to her room and stepped inside.*

“Wait, please!" Polly begged. "I just-“

The door is swiftly shut in Polly’s face. She is left awkwardly standing by herself in the hall. It’s over.

Polly tries to steady her breathing but it was rather strained. She swallows that feeling down and composes herself once more.

*“Sorry.* I’m so very sorry for bothering you.” Polly apologized into the door, raising her voice a bit in hopes that Ms. Suzuki would be able to hear her. She wipes the corners of her eyes and slowly turns back towards the hall as if to leave.

…

Polly turns back again.

*She steps up to the room number still looming over her head, and tries to speak one last time.*

“At first… I thought it was him." Polly began. "I thought it must have been your son who started their fight. I really didn’t understand why Basil would do that. I still don’t." Polly paused.

"When I watched them talking together… they really did seem like friends. Good friends. Just... happy kids." Polly thought aloud.

"But I had never seen Basil like that before. *Never.”*

*The door does not respond.*

“I don’t know what its like to lose two children.” Polly felt a lump in her throat. "I can't even imagine what that's like. I don't want to."

*“I could barely even stand losing one and he wasn’t really mine!”* Polly let out a pained smile while she stared at the ground.

...

“But… *I’m still falling apart.”* Polly muttered the last line under her breath, unsure of who she was talking to anymore, if anyone at all. *The hall was filled with a terrible silence.*

...

*A lock can be heard turning. The door opens again. The other woman stares at Polly with eyes so lifeless that it was hard to believe they belonged to someone who still drew breath. Those two deadened irises paused to inspect Polly's face for a moment before Ms. Suzuki quietly exhaled through her nose. Sunny's mother shuddered slightly as she moved away.*

To the caretaker’s surprise, the woman in the doorway steps to the side… *as if gesturing for Polly to come in.*

...

*So she does*.

---

The hotel room is small, but has two beds. One is perfectly neat as if untouched, whereas the other had clearly been in use for several days. Sunny’s mother took a seat on her bed and picked up a bottle of wine that had been left open on her side table. She poured herself some of the remaining liquid into a plastic cup while Polly awkwardly took a seat on the side of the opposing bed.

“Would you like a drink?” Ms. Suzuki asked. Her voice was even more lifeless and miserable than Polly was expecting.

“No, I’m fine, thank you.”

The woman picks up a second plastic cup and pours her a drink anyway. The lukewarm beverage was forcibly pressed into Polly’s hands. She silently accepts it and takes a sip.

*“So what do you want.”* Ms. Suzuki hastily inquired.

A brief moment of silence passes quickly, before the unrestrainable question exits Polly’s mouth once more.

“Do… we know each other?”

“No.”

“I see.”

...

“Do you know me, then?” Polly inquires again, a bit more hesitant this time.

Another moment of silence. The black-haired woman shrinks back slightly.

“Yes.” She admits.

“From... where exactly?”

Ms. Suzuki seemed to only grow steadily more distressed by Polly’s simple inquiries. She scraped the tips of her fingers against the cup in her hands for a brief moment before responding again.

"... nowhere.”

Polly’s eyebrows raised slightly.

“Oh.”

“I… just knew that you lived with him.” She clarified.

“You mean Basil?” Polly asked.

Ms. Suzuki nodded. The room fell silent for a moment while Polly struggled to put her disjointed thoughts together into words.

*Strange. What she just said was very strange. Why would she care about who was living with an old friend of her son? That didn’t make any sense. If that was truly the only thing that she knew about Polly, then why had she always been staring at her like that? Why did she always seem so agitated by her presence?*

Polly takes another sip of her wine, if only to make herself appear slightly more composed than she actually is. It was a cheap wine which tasted rather horrible, but that probably didn't matter much to the person who'd purchased it. Polly's nose wrinkled slightly.

*"Sorry.* I know it's not the best." Ms. Suzuki apologized suddenly.

Polly shook her head and smiled sadly. "No, no… it's fine. It's…"

Ms. Suzuki glanced at Polly's face after noticing she had trailed off again.

"Did… Basil ever do something like that when he was younger? Had he ever hurt your son like that before?" Polly inquired.

The other woman lowered her gaze and stared into the remaining hints of red liquid left lingering in her cup. Her eyes seemed to somehow grow even more dull and empty with every passing question. Polly began to wonder if she had gone too far.

"No. No he didn't. Basil was a very good kid." Sunny's mother denied.

Polly's breath hitched slightly. That statement sounded rather… *hesitant.* Unsure. Robotic, even. It felt almost as if the other woman had suddenly started trying to convince herself of something.

*That was untrue*. What she just said had to be untrue somehow. Polly shifted her feet with mild discomfort, now even more confused than before.

Something especially terrible seemed to hang in the air around them. Even though bright midday light was trying to stream in through the blinds, this room remained bathed in darkness, almost as if the sun itself was afraid to enter.

"I, actually… it's my fault." Sunny's mother suddenly spoke again. Her voice began to carry a bit more emotion, but Polly was unsure as to which emotion exactly, or its origin. Either way, her muddled words still expressed nothing.

"Fault?" Polly repeated, confused.

"I knew he was… they were… *that something was going wrong with the both of them."* Ms. Suzuki stated. "The two of them were always so distant. Sunny was such a quiet boy... and Basil was… *how would children even be thinking that way?"*

Polly listened silently as the older woman continued quietly rambling to herself, failing to understand her drunken words but afraid that interrupting them might lead to another painful silence.

"Even back then, he was always apologizing... as if he had done something wrong. I sometimes wondered if he was being abused, but I never found anything physically wrong with him." Ms. Suzuki mumbled. "I couldn't understand what it was that he was afraid of..."

*"Basil?"* Polly requested clarification.

Ms. Suzuki nodded as she continued, but the other woman barely even seemed to be paying attention to Polly anymore. She just mumbled quietly into her cup as if speaking to herself. With every passing word, her voice seemed to grow increasingly strained by that slow uprising of emotion.

“If I had done something different, none of this would have happened. *It’s my fault.* They both needed help and I ignored them." She muttered. *"Mari did, too.”*

Polly considered asking something more but she continued holding her tongue. A strange, cold sensation seemed to build up at the bottom of her spine as she listened to the person across from her. After mentioning her daughter, the other woman’s voice appeared to steadily grow in volume with every passing word.

“If I hadn’t pressed her so much at the beginning, then she wouldn’t have tried so hard. She would never have put that same pressure on him. It wouldn’t have hurt their relationship the way it did.” Ms. Suzuki stated. "I could have stopped it..."

*Polly started growing increasingly nervous as the other woman’s drunken cries became louder and more emotional. This was a very bad idea.*

Ms. Suzuki finally looked back up from her cup and stared Polly directly in the face. She almost seemed as if she was about to break down in tears, but her next words were seemingly held together by a silent underpinning of cold anger.

“I could have stopped all of this from happening. It wasn’t their fault. It was mine. *Ours."* She corrected herself.

Polly stared at the floor as Sunny’s mother began to quietly sob to herself.

“I’m sorry... I’m not sure how much of that I understood.” Polly admitted in a small voice. “I knew how your daughter had left us, but I couldn’t hear anything about it from Basil. I didn’t want to imagine that he would ever try the same… *even though I should have.* I'm so, so sorry for your loss."

Polly almost thought that Sunny’s mother had let out a choked laugh between her sobs, but she wasn’t sure. Polly felt each hair on her arms attempt to stand up at once.

Polly sat silently until the black-haired woman seemed to calm down again. She was deeply discomforted but still refused to leave. Polly wondered if it would even be safe to leave this person alone by herself again. In fact, she was horrified by the idea that Sunny’s mother had been spending all her time alone since her son’s disappearance. *Where were her friends and family at a time like this?*

The state of this room and the state of this person conveyed a sense of never-ending hopelessness to Polly that she had never seen before in her life.

But that made sense, didn't it? They had been intending to leave all of this behind. Before Basil did what he did, Sunny and his mother were just about to move out of Faraway entirely, to a new life... until that boy vanished into thin air.

*Shattered.* They were both broken apart in the same way Basil was. In the same way his friends were.

If Polly had lost her child in the same way this woman did, would she have been able to live on from that? If she had been exposed to such a suicide when she was Basil's age, would Polly have ever been able to fully recover from it?

...

*And yet, in spite of the obvious tragedy at hand, Polly still felt as though something about all of this was horribly wrong.*

Basil wasn't like his friends. He wasn't just sad, or empty, or mourning… he was *guilty.* Basil was guilty as if he had done something unforgivable. You could see it written all over his face.

And **she** had always stared at her. Sunny's mother would glance at Polly over and over, as if filled by some kind of anger, or sadness, or pity…

*Something about all of this was wrong.*

Polly felt a lump growing in her throat. A lump which pushed the question that had been lingering inside her out and into the open air.

"I know this is going too far, I know it's horribly selfish to ask this, I know you said he didn't do anything wrong, but…" Polly preempted herself.

…

"Did anything bad happen between your daughter and Basil before she killed herself?"

A sudden change seemed to come over the other woman as Polly asked her forbidden question. She stopped shaking, and stopped sobbing… *which somehow just unnerved Polly even more.*

The other woman's mouth opened, and flickered between a delusional smile and a hopeless frown for a few seconds before the last hints of life lingering in her eyes seemed to finally drain away.

A cloud must have passed over the sun for a moment, because the few remaining rays of light creeping in through the window suddenly dulled and faded to grey. The terrible silence which Polly created was broken in tandem with those growing shadows.

"... she didn't." Mrs Suzuki spoke emotionlessly.

*"Didn't?"* Polly mirrored back, puzzled.

"…"

"I apologize, I don't think I understand what you-"

"My son killed my daughter... when he was twelve. He knocked her down our stairwell on accident."

…

*"I- I'm sorry?"* Polly stuttered, feeling as if she must have misheard that statement somehow.

*But she didn't misunderstand a thing. The next dreadful words that quietly left the other woman's mouth slowly flooded into the hotel room like a curse.*

"Sunny tied her body to a tree in our backyard to make it look like she'd done it to herself."

***The air froze***.

For the next few moments, Polly felt as if the person she was speaking to must genuinely be out of her mind. Her erratic ramblings would obviously make more sense then. She had to have become completely delusional after all this.

Perhaps her daughter's suicide had scarred her so terribly that her fractured mind had somehow created a fictional tragedy which would enable her to escape the truth. Maybe it was easier to believe that your daughter's death was a horrific accident rather than to know it was an intentional rejection of the life they had been given. To lose one's firstborn child must have been too traumatizing an experience to bear… *and that trauma had led to this bizarre dissociation from reality.*

How awful.

*But, yet…*

The words she'd spoken had so much **misery** held in them. The thoughts which leaked out of her mouth radiated a sense of hopelessness so strong that it almost seemed as if the room around them was about to collapse in on itself.

Polly knew what liars looked like, and what they sounded like... or at least she thought she did.

Polly was very good at identifying lies. For better or worse, she had to be.

And somehow…

Polly felt sure that this woman wasn't lying. *How was she not lying?*

*Polly felt a growing shadow squirm in the pit of her stomach. Deep down, she instantaneously knew that what the other woman had just muttered was true, but she wasn't entirely sure how, yet. Something that shouldn't have made any sense slowly started to fit together into horrible forms that twisted violently in the back of her head. Her mind began racing at random but it was hopelessly stuck in place, only managing to shakily assemble unwanted puzzle pieces into an ugly image that was not yet identifiable.*

*Ms. Suzuki speaks again. Polly flinches. Maybe she should have just covered her ears this time.*

"But it wasn't his idea… they were still with him when it happened. Just desperate to protect him, I suppose. Both of them were just kids." She repeated.

"T-They?" Polly stuttered.

*"Just little boys…"* Ms. Suzuki mumbled again, choking back a sob.

"…"

*Sunny's mother didn't speak anymore.* She didn't say another word, because there would have been nothing to gain from the attempt. There were no more horrid truths to be revealed by tongue. She simply raised her head and stared Polly in the face with pathetic tears silently glistening on her cheeks. She stared Polly in the face with those terribly deadened eyes… and in those eyes Polly could finally see what had long been hidden within their depths. A sense of deep, sorrowful pity stared back at her. It was something inescapable. *The lingering tendrils of a long-hidden curse* ***now shared****.*

...

***Polly's eyes widen***.

# Basil's Box

*Basil suggested something stupid again. They had an argument again. Sunny apologized again. Basil felt bad again. They both tried the phones again. Sunny tripped on his feet again. Basil threw up again. They both tried to sleep again. Basil had a dream again.*

Basil dreams he's inside a dark grey box.

It only takes him a few moments to come to his conclusion. He feels fairly sure that this is in fact a dream due to the room's bizarre shape... but the illusion still feels quite vivid, even for him.

Basil tried not to work himself up too much wondering about it, because that was usually what would wake him up. Basil wanted to continue dreaming this dream in particular, but wasn't entirely sure why. He couldn't shake the feeling that he really needed sleep right now... *for a reason he couldn't quite remember.*

But unfortunately for him, whenever Basil kept himself from getting worked up he would often end up forgetting that he was in a dream at all, thus swiftly losing the opportunity to poke around inside his own head with that temporary sense of awareness. It was like a mental balancing act- he had to try to stay lucid enough to recognize that it was all imaginary, but not become *so* lucid that he'd be shaken awake again by his own thoughts.

*The dream felt very familiar.* It must have been something that he had dreamt before... *but that he also might have forgotten.* Basil feels like he's been here a few times before. At the very least, he was sure he had experienced some other dream within this particular setting. This had to have been the second time he had seen this box. *Third, maybe.*

*But as strange as the empty box may have been, the most notable part of the dream was definitely the blonde's companion. Basil is not alone.*

For whatever reason, Sunny seemingly lives in the box with him. Basil gazes over his friend's motionless form. The other boy is sleeping, tiny breaths slowly entering and exiting his chest.

Sunny had been through a lot, so it made sense that he'd be tired now. The blonde hoped his friend was having his own relaxing dreams.

Basil is tired too, but he doesn't feel particularly relaxed. He tries make out the walls of the box but his vision is blurry. He attempts to move his arms but its as if he's incapable of mustering enough energy to do so. His limbs feel like they're full of lead.

The box used to be rumbling before, Basil felt fairly certain of that. The soft shaking of the box had helped Basil relax moments earlier, but it didn't seem to be bouncing around at all anymore.

Basil thinks that maybe he should just go back to sleep… *but then again, hadn't he already been sleeping for a while?*

*No, he **is** sleeping. This is a dream. Don't forget.*

It felt weird to have a dream about sleeping. A dream about being tired. Basil really was rather exhausted.

*But for some reason he also felt as if maybe he should get up now?*

...

*Maybe not.* It was dark in here. Usually, the sun shining through the window was what would wake him up. There was no light in here, so it must still be nighttime. The sun hadn't risen yet.

Sun. Sunny. Wait, why was Sunny in his room, again? That **was** Sunny over there, Basil was sure of it.

*Right.* This wasn't really his room. This was his hospital room. *He just forgot for some reason…*

Wait, but didn't his hospital room also have a window?

Also, Sunny was still in his room right now.

Why would Sunny want to sleep in his friend's room after what Basil did to him? After they fought and he… *wait, what did Basil do again? It was all pretty bad, wasn't it?*

Basil continues trying to remember all of the confusing stuff that he'd somehow already begun to forget but his mind is far too tired for it. He'll get up and ask Sunny what's going on in a second, he just needs to find the energy first...

But for some reason he's having a lot of trouble moving. It feels almost impossible. Basil tries to get up but he can't even manage to roll himself over. It's as if his own skin is made of solid concrete. *Maybe he should just give in…*

The flower boy musters all his strength and just barely manages to roll over and lay on his side. It feels good to have adjusted his position. He must have been lying like that for a long-

***Someone else is in the box with them***. Basil tries to scream in a sudden panic but he doesn't have a voice. His body is practically paralyzed. Basil had not noticed them before, but there was a third person inside the box. A large figure sat upright on the ground, silently watching Basil from the shadows.

*Basil does not know who this is.*

The stranger's cold gaze is obvious even in the darkness. Basil's heart beats so fast it feels as if its going to explode, but the boy still can't move.

The shadowy figure seemingly ignores his horror and slowly stands up. Basil watches as they start drifting over to Sunny. The figure silently looms over Sunny and begins to touch Basil's friend in the ribcage. They're doing something strange to him. They jostle the sleeping boy as if testing to see if he will respond. Sunny doesn't move.

*Basil is not tired anymore. He is wide awake and terrified. Basil wants to get up but he can't. All he wants to do is move his own legs, but they do not listen. He's glued to the ground.*

The shadowy figure continues touching Sunny while Basil does nothing. The other boy still hadn't moved, but Sunny's expression changed. His eye remained closed... *but he began to grimace in obvious discomfort.*

Basil watches in horror as his friend's eye lulls halfway open. Sunny begins to move. He starts to move his legs slightly but it appears as if he can barely manage to struggle at all. His motions seem extremely strained but he was still going nowhere. His condition is even more pitiful than Basil's. Sunny's breathing becomes shallow and unnatural.

*There are tears on his face now. The figure just did something to Sunny. Whatever they had done, it upset him.*

Basil tries to scream for help, but he only manages to loudly exhale through his mouth. The eyes turn back to look at Basil once more. *It heard him.*

*The figure moves away from Sunny and towards him instead. Basil cannot move away. They're going to do something to him this time.*

Sunny makes an unnerving sound from the other side of the box, as if trying to get the figure's attention. It's little more than a choked whisper, but it draws the stranger's attention regardless. The person turns away from Basil again and back to the blonde's friend.

Sunny wriggles back and forth fruitlessly. He is also clearly incapable of getting up. The shadowy figure steps next to him and puts one foot on each side of the boy's torso.

Basil feels tears coming out of his eyes. He tries to scream again, but only manages to eject a small dribble of saliva out from his lips.

The third person in the box leans down and holds something over Sunny's face. The wriggling stops.

*Sunny is no longer moving.*

For a single, horrendous moment, Basil was convinced that his friend had just been killed right in front of him. Choked to death.

But that didn't make any sense. It was just too fast, and too silent.

*Unconscious.* Sunny was just unconscious now.

Having silenced the blonde's friend, those terrible eyes turn back to view Basil once again. They drift towards him slowly. Basil squeezes his own eyes shut, incapable of facing the terror approaching him. Whatever is about to happen, Basil doesn't want to see it coming.

For a few moments, nothing happens at all. The nightmare person seemingly pokes Basil in the stomach as if testing to see if he was still awake, to which the boy impulsively whimpers in discomfort.

Another moment of nothingness passes by as Basil waits in silent horror.

*The figure then presses something over Basil's face and around his mouth. It's cold and damp. It makes Basil feel nauseous. He can't breathe.*

*But it was okay, because this was just a bad dream. It's just a bad dream, and this was the part where Basil would finally wake up. Basil feels something pinch him hard in the side.*

*Basil wakes up and screams.*

…

Except he doesn't. Basil is still dreaming, and he's still inside the box. His pitiful excuse for a scream only manages to push out a hint of air from his lungs. The man is gone now.

Basil still remains incapable of moving. Maybe he's experiencing some kind of sleep paralysis... *while asleep.* Dream paralysis.

*Scary.* This is far too scary for Basil. *Just let this nightmare end soon, please…*

But although it may just be a dream, the discomfort Basil feels in his back is all too real. **It hurts**. His stomach hurts even more.

Wherever he was, Basil had been inside the nightmare box for far too long. He had been in this position for too long. The box's rumbling started again, but it wasn't relaxing anymore, it only hurt his spine.

Basil feels very thirsty but even if there was water right in front of him he would not be able to drink it as he is incapable of even the most basic motion.

*He feels ill. His stomach burns. He's nauseous and wants to throw up. Something is very, very wrong with him.*

*Whatever is taking away Basil's ability to control his body is also going to kill him. The paralysis makes it difficult for Basil to breathe correctly. Every time he fills his lungs it is a sizable effort.*

Basil feels bile build up in his mouth but he can't even bring himself to swallow it. His own throat will not listen to him. He coughs fluid.

*Whatever is keeping him like this, it is effecting his brain. Basil is sure he has been forgetting something important about this room, but he never manages to remember what. Sometimes he becomes unsure of what is happening in the space around him, as his vision repeatedly blurs.*

Basil didn't believe in the idea that dreams held special meanings, (in fact, he really hoped they didn't) but the longer this nightmare went on, the less it felt like a dream at all. It felt more like a bad memory that was being forcibly replayed inside his head. Basil was all too used to that... *but this nightmare was one he did not intuitively recognize.*

But it wasn't as if anything like this had actually happened. Sunny and him were both still recuperating in the hospital right now.

*Wait, they WERE still in the hospital, weren't they?*

*Maybe this dream was repeating because he kept forgetting it after he woke up again? Why did he keep forgetting?*

*He can't keep forgetting. Next time he wakes up, he needs to remember what has been happening in this box.*

*But he's not going to. Basil feels something cause another pinching pain in his side, and his mind becomes even fuzzier than it was before. He can no longer even remember his own name.*

*Basil isn't anyone now.*

*He's just a body that's slowly dying on the floor.*

*He's half-alive and drowning on land.*

*Basil is going to die here.*

Basil wakes up with his head under a blanket. That warm sheet of fabric had been suffocating him as it compressed around his face. He thrashes his arms for a moment before finally realizing what was going on.

He quickly removes himself from beneath the covers and takes a breath, struggling to refocus his vision. He's in a bedroom, but it is not his own...

*Well, kind of.* Its not a real bedroom at all, but a fake one. A fictionalized furniture showcase of sorts. Basil slowly remembers where he is and the situation he's in as reality sadistically forces itself back inside his panicked little head. He feels the burning pain in his abdomen greet him in full force, quickly wrapping its arms around him once more. The blonde takes a series of deep breaths as he attempts to calm his racing pulse.

*Basil pauses for a moment and tries to remember why he was suddenly so afraid, but most of his terrible nightmare is swiftly forgotten. If Basil had not been through so many hardships recently, his bad dream might have haunted him longer... but his still-exhausted mind has little time for that now.*

Basil turns to look at his friend as the other boy slowly exhales beside him.

*After all, he'd awoken from one nightmare into another.*

# Sunny's Door

"Do you want to go to the bathroom?" Basil inquired. "It's been a while."

"Sure."

*The pair walks down the now-all-too-familiar hallway in silence. The only sound apart from the wind outside is the soft pattering of their feet passing across the tile floor.*

Sunny had been fine for a while, but the further down the hall they get, the more disoriented he feels. The pounding in his head is so strong that he feels as if it's shaking the ground beneath him. He tries to focus on simply putting one foot in front of the other... but focusing so hard on walking just makes the task even harder, for whatever reason.

Sunny knows that if he asks for Basil's hand to steady himself then his friend would swiftly offer it to him, but...

*Sunny could walk by himself, anyway.*

Sunny trips on his own feet slightly as his face contorts from the pulsating in his head, but Basil doesn't say anything. He just silently glances in the other boy's direction for a moment, seemingly holding his tongue. Sunny pretends not to notice his friend's gaze. From the edge of his vision, Sunny couldn't quite recognize if the look on Basil's face was one of worry, disdain, or indifference. Maybe he didn't want to know.

Sunny felt the corner of his lip attempt to curl upward in frustration, but he managed to force his own expression to remain neutral. If Basil wanted to grab Sunny's hand and try to keep his friend upright, he would have to do so himself.

*But Sunny knew he wouldn't, because Basil must have loathed him by now.*

***Hate***. Sunny hated this stupid, evil building. He couldn't stand being here anymore. This place had torn apart everything between him and Basil. It felt almost as if the universe saw that Sunny was finally beginning to make progress in repairing the things in his life which he had shattered, and that infinite cosmos subsequently teleported him to a place which would guarantee he'd ruin everything all over again. The heavens above his head had conspired to once again snap Sunny out of his own narcissistic delusions.

...

But that was all just pointless self-pity. It wasn't as though the building could actually force him to do anything. It was just a building.

What else had he been expecting? Even a world as awful as this one had to have some kind of justice in it... and after what Sunny had done, this punishment was actually quite merciful. He got to bring his favorite inmate along, after all.

...

*Sunny focuses on the pulsating pain inside his skull. He's unravelling.*

---

The pair finally reached the end of the hall. Basil didn't actually need to go to the restroom at present, so the blonde decidedly stayed in the lobby and kept poking at the phones again while Sunny went to the toilets by himself.

Sunny was a hypocrite. He had only just recently stated that they should no longer be splitting up like this... *but then again, Basil had not complained about it*. His companion would only be just around the corner, after all.

Sunny pushes open the restroom door that he had propped open for Basil on the night they'd arrived, and for a brief moment he is forced to take note of how frighteningly mundane this place had begun to feel compared to what it had been like back then. He lets the door swing closed behind him as he steps inside. It makes a surprisingly loud sound when it drifts back into place on its own. Sunny flinches in fear and turns around for a moment before swiftly replacing that childish fear with a sudden surge of embarrassment. The **door** had just frightened him. Sunny was scaring himself over absolutely nothing at this point. He silently eyes the door over as if it was somehow going to fly back open and punish him for shutting it improperly.

...

There was a simple twisting lock on the restroom door that became visible whenever it was not propped open. Sunny begins to stare at it, but he isn't really sure why. Something about it just makes him pause.

When he was younger, Sunny had often wondered why some restroom doors could even be locked when they obviously shouldn't be. In the case of a one-person bathroom, having a lock in place made sense... but in a room like this (with several urinals and stalls lined up alongside one another) locking the door would greedily hog the entire space for oneself.

Someone could walk into the restroom and then lock everyone else out for no reason, if they wanted to. It didn't make any sense. There really was no discernable point in allowing a self-centered individual to steal an entire restroom for themselves, *was there?*

Sunny reaches his arm back towards the door... *and flips the lock.*

...

*The door is locked, now.*

...

***Why did he lock it?***

*Sunny continues staring at the door as if the lock itself would somehow explain the boy's own actions to him if he simply waited long enough. Unsurprisingly, that outcome appeared increasing unlikely with every passing moment.*

The door says nothing, so Sunny begins to rationalize with himself instead. What if he really did fall down in here and couldn't get back on his feet again? He wouldn't be able to unlock the door for Basil then. What he had just done was not only illogical, it was outright dangerous. Only an absolute moron would leave the door locked on their friend in a situation like this. *What happened to not splitting up? What is he even doing anymore? Unlock the door, idiot.*

*But he doesn't. Sunny leaves the door locked. For some reason, having it locked relaxes him slightly...*

***Why****? Why does it relax him? Basil is out there by himself. Wasn't every second he spent apart from his friend just another opportunity that something bad could happen? Why was he*

*acting like it was safe to just leave Basil alone at all after what the other boy had been doing under his nose this entire time? Basil **couldn't** be left alone.*

*Didn't Sunny just come in here to use the toilet? Why is he having an existential crisis over the lock on a bathroom door? How delusional could you get? What is even happening to him anymore?*

**Enough was enough**. Sunny quickly moves over to the urinals and does his business. Basil was definitely going to be upset if he spent so long in here for no reason. Sunny washes his hands thoroughly before briefly glancing at his own reflection in the bathroom mirror. He looked exhausted. His hair was a mess. His face was a mess. *He was a mess.*

...

---

*Maybe it was simply an impulsive desire to escape from the situation he was currently in, but Sunny felt himself begin to slowly slip into his own head. Sunny also felt as though he should've been trying harder to fight off his own dissociative impulses, but fleeing into his mind just seemed so easy in this moment.*

*Sunny starts to drift into his own memories... memories of him and his sister and their friends... all those which his dreamscape had forcibly locked away from him. In particular, for reasons he didn't quite understand...*

**Sunny began to think of old sleepovers.**

Sunny always enjoyed sleeping alongside his friends, but getting a roomful of people to all successfully fall asleep at the same time was a significant effort.

Not for him, (Sunny could fall asleep practically anywhere) but for the others. Kel would snore and said snoring would wake Aubrey up so she would kick him and said kicking would wake Mari up and so on. Such a domino effect ensured that if simply one person was having trouble sleeping, the entire group would remain at risk of sudden naptime disruption.

The most reasonable solution to the problem was therefore to ensure all of their friends were exhausted at the same time, and the best way to guarantee that was to find something for them all to do together. So they'd stay up into the quietest hours of the night, playing games or watching movies... always sleeping in far too late the following morning. Therefore,

sleepovers were mostly reserved for lazy days in the summer so that oversleeping well into the afternoon would not be an issue that warranted any real parental concern.

*On those particular summer nights it often became somewhat of a game amongst Sunny's friends to see who would be the first to break. To see who would finally insist that it was time for bed... and although that dishonor would almost invariably fall upon Mari or Hero's shoulders, neither of the older pair were ever in any particular rush to get to sleep, either. And so the games would be extended, the movies would be strung along one after another, and Sunny's friends would continue denying themselves much-needed rest simply because they were having too much fun in each other's company.*

It was during those long over-extended nights which Sunny had first witnessed how an entire roomful of people could swiftly start to mentally decompose from lack of rest. A bad joke which would have only been half-funny during the day became something of a laughing riot when everyone was similarly low on sleep. Soon enough one might even find themselves laughing at one of Mari's terrible standup acts.

Kel and Aubrey also got along better on those sleep-deprived nights, if only because both would usually be too exhausted to bother prolonging any of their nightly conflicts. However, if they did end up arguing, it would typically become something particularly nasty... oftentimes concluding with a forced apology initiated by the two watchful "adults" in the room.

So Sunny learned that when people were lacking sleep, they often became more emotional... in both a good way *and* a bad way. Mari managed to fluster Hero a little more... Basil would become a bit more talkative...

*It was fun, seeing everyone like that. It was fun to watch as they allowed themselves to get swept up in the moment.*

Sunny would try his best to stay awake with everyone but he'd almost always be the first to fall asleep, usually by his sister's side. He just could never help himself.

Those were good nights.

*But there was a point after which a lack of rest stopped being fun and slowly became something deeply unsettling. Sunny hadn't ever fully understood that until he had gotten trapped in this place with Basil. Over and over he had fallen asleep... fallen unconscious... but eventually Sunny began to feel as though his mind was not actually recovering at all. If anything, he felt as if his grasp on reality now became more and more tenuous with every subsequent attempt at rest. The repeated feeling of opening his eyes only to experience the*

*momentary horror of a swiftly-forgotten dream was beginning to drive him insane. It was no wonder that Basil had ended up panicking the way he did. Something about this place was getting to them both.*

---

The boy's momentary glance turns into a prolonged stare. Sunny stared at his lifeless face in the bathroom mirror. He tries to flex his mouth into anything other than a miserable frown, but he finds himself incapable of doing so. He just couldn't manage it no matter how hard he strained the muscles under his skin.

*Sunny's stare slowly turns into a glare. Sunny glared at himself. He was still wearing the same novelty eyepatch he had stolen earlier. Basil had been right to make fun of him for it. He looked ridiculous like this.*

The injured boy pulled the eyepatch loose from his hair and began tugging at the sides of the improvised ocular bandaging that his friend had given him earlier.

Sunny closed his eye as he steadily pulled away at the adhesive. He wouldn't open it again until he felt that the medical patch had entirely let go of his face. He wanted to see the damage all at once.

*The bandage was removed. Sunny opened his eye. Same flesh as usual.*

A tiny dribble of fluid ran out of his socket after the bandage was removed, but Sunny wasn't sure if it was blood or not. Maybe a mixture of blood and... *some other liquid.* It was still mostly red, though. *Pinkish.*

*Sunny eyed himself.* Nothing about his wound looked particularly out of the ordinary, and exposure to the air no longer caused his empty socket to cry out in pain... which was an improvement. It seemed as if the wound had actually cleared-up somewhat. His head still softly pounded in distress, but his missing eye appeared to be getting better, at least. That was good... *wasn't it?*

Sunny examined his own reflection for some hint of life but was incapable of finding any despite his intensive efforts. An unidentifiable sensation started building up in the back of his mind as he struggled.

...

*As stupid as it was, as **insane** as it was, Sunny almost felt like asking his reflection a question.*

But that was just a ridiculous impulse. It was not as if the boy in the mirror would ever be able to say anything back, condemnation or otherwise. That body-double of his would speak no words which weren't also spoken by Sunny himself. That's just how a reflection worked. No matter how desperate he was... *if he was looking for help, Sunny wouldn't find it in this mirror.*

...

A tiny part of him wished that maybe someone else would appear in the mirror alongside him. Anyone.

...

Mari.

...

*That was even stupider.* And yet, Sunny could not shake the desire from his mind.

He had finally stopped hallucinating those twisted, nightmarish contortions of her... *but right now he almost wished he hadn't.* Sunny wanted to know how he would feel in this moment if a body with long black hair suddenly materialized beside him. He wanted to know if he would still be able to silently endure it as he once did, or if that swelling of terror would overwhelm him. Maybe something unexpected would happen.

...

Or maybe that thought was just an excuse. Maybe he was just desperate to know what she would think of him right now.

...

***This was pointless***. *He was done using the bathroom now. It was time to leave.*

...

*Would he still be afraid now that he'd admitted to everything? Would he scream out in horror now that his long-hidden emotions had returned in full-force? Would it make him feel even more hollow than before, or would he finally be able to react to her presence? To say something in response?*

*He wants her to appear once again... even if only as a demon which torments him. Sunny wants to speak to her now more than anything. He desperately wants to ask Mari a question, even if she'd only hate him for it. Sunny was coming undone right now. He needed her help.*

He doesn't know what to do. He doesn't know what he's been doing. Sunny had just ruined everything over and over since he followed Kel out of the house that day. Nothing was any different. *It was all just nightmare after nightmare after nightmare...*

*He wasn't like her. He didn't know how to fix what he had done... if something so selfish was even possible.*

*Sunny tries for what must have been the hundredth time to imagine what Mari would say to him during a terrible moment like this, but he can't. Of course he can't. Because he's not Mari. He can only ever picture things that she's already said to him. Idle discourse with which to torture himself. The kinds of things that he shouldn't want to hear.*

*"What's the matter little brother? Did you have a tough time at school today? Wanna tell me what happened?"*

*I'm sorry.*

*"You know you can talk to me about anything, right?"*

*I can't.*

The tiny cracks in the bathroom wall behind him begin to slowly fill up with squirming hairs as Sunny continues silently staring at his reflection in the bathroom mirror. This entire space would probably begin filling up with terrible hallucinations if he doesn't leave soon. Enough really **was** enough. Hallucinations or not, *it was time to exit the restroom.*

...

.....

.........

**Sunny suddenly starts to panic. The throbbing in his head dulls slightly, but his arms begin to shake. *That's when he knows.***

*He can't go back out of this room. He can't go see Basil again. He doesn't want to hurt him anymore. He can't do it.*

*He wants to go back to the quiet room now. His room. His white room. Sunny can't hurt anyone in there. Sunny can't be hurt by anyone, either.*

*He's tired of making everyone angry all the time. He's tired of making Basil sad over and over. He just wants to lie down on the floor and feel nothing again.* ***Was it really wrong of him to want that?*** *Nothing ever worked out...*

***NOTHING****. Sunny had spent so long feeling nothing. He had spent the last few years of his life buried under that emptiness, and had only recently escaped... but escaping was too painful.*

*Escaping hurt. Changing hurt. Telling the truth hurt. It was all so, so miserable.*

*Was it really better to be awake? Was this what it was like to finally be himself? He had spent so long separated from everything that he was having a little trouble remembering...*

*Did horrible stuff like this always happen to him? Was it actually sort of normal for your sister to die because of you? For you to wake up in a horrible place like this? Were these things not so uncommon as Sunny had imagined them to be?*

*If he kept going, would nightmares like this keep happening? Just over and over until he was dead?*

*Did he have to live that way? If he closed his eyes right now, and laid down on this dirty bathroom floor... would he be able to go back? Could he simply disappear into his little white void and just... forget any of it ever happened? Forget all over again?*

Probably not. Something like that would be far too convenient, wouldn't it?

Besides, what about the person he would leave behind? Sunny couldn't run away anymore. Of course he couldn't. He still hadn't even tried to make it up to them. *He **definitely** hadn't made it up to Basil.*

*Mari, this place is scary. Nothing about it makes any sense. If Basil wasn't here with me I would have lost my mind already...*

**Why is he talking to himself like this right now? He doesn't have time for it. Open the door.**

*...*

*Was this some kind of joke? What the hell is he doing right now? Why are his hands shaking like this? All he's doing is using the bathroom. This is far from the scariest position he had been in recently. What was happening to him?*

They'd been stuck here for almost three days already, and Sunny had spent more than half of that time unconscious. Nothing bad had happened to him then. Nothing bad was going to happen now... unless it was something Sunny was doing himself. No more running. **Open. The. Door.**

**And yet, despite Sunny's continued insistence, the door somehow remained closed.**

...

*Ha.. h-haha...*

*Sunny continues picking apart his own reflection. Both him and his friend had clearly been right on the edge of falling apart since they got here. The fact that he and Basil had even lasted this long felt like some kind of cosmic mistake.*

*But now they were both finally starting to show the extent of their damage. There was only so much two people could take.*

*Sunny was actually going to lose himself in here. He could feel it. The miserable little dreamer thought that he'd already understood what it was like to go completely insane but maybe he didn't.*

Sunny's mind was steadily unwinding itself, even though it shouldn't have been. He still had someone else in here with him, after all. Sunny wasn't alone anymore. Nothing was as bad as he was imagining...

*Except the two of them could barely seem to speak to each other for even a moment without some kind of escalation. They were both too... **exposed**, here.*

*Every time him and Basil locked eyes Sunny could see it again. The thinly-veiled fear that lingered within his friend's gaze had only bubbled up more and more frequently as the hours passed on. Sunny had let himself believe that things improved a lot for the both of them back when they were still in the hospital together, but maybe that wasn't the case. Maybe he had just allowed himself to grow comfortable there. Regardless, this empty building had swiftly stolen those gentle feelings away.*

*They were in no physical condition to be here, and it had become readily apparent that they were not in the mental condition, either. It wasn't as if that was a surprising observation, but for a while Sunny had still been hopeful. He had been hopeful that they were starting to get better. That **he** was starting to get better.*

Sunny had finally begun to believe that he really wouldn't end up hurting his friend again.

But he had been wrong. Very wrong.

*The surreal, dreamlike nature of their current situation had become slightly less pronounced for Sunny the longer him and his friend had spent in this place, but that was only because he never really had the time to dwell on it. They'd both been largely preoccupied with too many other shared problems, fears, and conflicts.*

But now that Sunny had the time to continue rotating it around inside his head, this place really did only grow increasingly bizarre and nightmarish over time. If he had arrived to this building without a friend by his side to communicate and commiserate with, he would have almost certainly believed that he really had died in the hospital, and that this place really was some kind of purgatory. A final layer of a black space.

*And Sunny already knows there is only one way out of Black Space.* ***Open the door.***

...

*But this was actually fair, wasn't it? Basil had ignored his friend for a little bit. He couldn't complain if Sunny spent another minute by himself. It wouldn't be right of him.*

*Besides, it's not like he would even care. Basil probably didn't want to even share the same room with him anymore, and was right to feel that way. Basil probably hoped he would just stay in the bathroom forever.*

*He could stay in here... for just a few more minutes...*

...

*Sunny began rubbing his hand slowly across the side of his face. It really was gone, wasn't it? He only had one eye now. He would only ever have one.*

It was strange how little time he felt like he'd had to even think about it... he was in such a rush at the hospital... so concerned with revealing the truth... with repairing things between him and Basil...

But his eye is really, genuinely gone. Forever.

*Poof.*

...

Would Mari have liked his new eyepatch? She always loved playing dress-up with Aubrey.

They had dressed Mari up really well, actually. After she died. She looked so peaceful when her eyes were closed that way. Closed in a way that made it seem as if Sunny reached out and squeezed her arm one more time, she would finally wake up again. Wake and reveal that all of it really had been nothing more than a bad dream. A nightmare that simply took a while to finally come to an end. Sunny couldn't wait to wake up. *Why **was** her arm so limp, anyway?*

*Wake up. Mari... it was time to go home... please...*

*Stop it.* ***Open. The. Door.***

If only through abject desperation, Sunny finally made some amount of progress in moving towards the exit. He shuffled towards the air dryer, but paused while continuing to stare at his own reflection as if it was somehow managing to freeze him in place.

Sunny's eyepatch remained off. He considered walking back out the door looking like this. This was the face that suited him better. He knew that Basil felt horrible about it, but Sunny wanted to insist to him that he didn't have to. This face was just as much Sunny's fault as it was his friend's. Maybe hurting each other was just what they were both best at.

*He couldn't help but picture it. The way Basil's eyes reflected the moonlight as it streamed in from his bedroom window. The look on his face that shifted quickly from horrified panic to empty, hopeless despair. A despair so deep and inescapable that it made the thought of killing your friend into an act of pity.*

*If he opened the door right now, would Basil look at him like that again? Like he always did whenever Sunny found him trembling alone in the darkness?*

"Sunny, are you okay in there?"

*The voice of a second boy drifts in from the hall. Sunny's heartbeat triples.*

**That's him**. That's the person Sunny had spent so long searching for. They're calling for Sunny to return to the stage. He needs to go back out there now. He had spent so long practicing for this after all, hadn't he? Alone in that bed, talking to the colorful remains of his friends which lingered within his dreams...

You practiced before you took the stage, so you wouldn't make the same mistakes once you were up there. Sunny couldn't keep making any more mistakes. Mari would never forgive him if he did.

"You should smile more! I've always liked your smile."

***Smile more**. That's what she always said. She always smiled even when she was upset, just like Basil. She was so good at keeping it all together.*

*Sunny knew he needed to keep it together, but he wasn't sure what he was even keeping together anymore.*

"You didn't fall down in there, did you?"

"I'm okay!" Sunny responds to the person in the hall.
"I'm just checking on... *I'm just washing my hands."*

"Alright..."

*Footsteps move away from the door.*

Sunny had spoken just then, but his own voice sounded like a puppet. As if it wasn't really coming from his own mouth, but from a twisted fake doing its best to impersonate some version of himself that wasn't in such a pathetic condition.

Sunny knows he really needs to hurry up, but he doesn't want to. He wants to just quit. He's always been lazy like that. Mari always said he wasn't allowed to quit. Not after everything

everyone had done for him. He needed to pay them back, somehow. She had told him their performance was going to steal everyone's breath away.

*Mari was almost right.*

At the very least, it definitely wasn't the show anyone had been expecting.

...

**Sunny feels a tangled web compressing and growing dense within his skull.**

*Usually you needed practice... before you went up on stage for everyone to see. But Basil had already gotten his practice, somehow. He already knew exactly what to do.*

*When did he learn it? How to tie a rope like that? He had thought it all up so quickly. Improvised it on the spot. Basil must have... thought about stuff like that a lot.*

***Fuck.***

*Basil said he shared everything with Sunny, but that was never really true, was it?*

Sunny did play a duet that night, just not with the person everyone thought he would. Basil didn't have to help him after what he'd done, but that's just the kind of person Sunny's friend was... *even during the worst night of their lives.*

*Sunny blinks at his reflection in the mirror. He used to be able to stare at it so lifelessly, so emotionlessly... but now it horrified him. Every additional crease under his exhausted eyes felt like yet another crack in the new bulb that was desperately trying to hold him together. His own empty expression terrified him deeply, but he was seemingly incapable of looking away.*

He only has one eye remaining after their second performance. If he left this room, would there be a third? Sunny couldn't take that. He was so tired of going back on stage. It always hurt him. Him and everyone else. He wants to run from it. It's always so much easier just to run from it.

The bathroom door stands silently, but Sunny feels as though the passageway is judging him. It looms over his shrunken form and tallies all his sins together with clinical precision.

...

*No it doesn't.* He's just panicking. Panicking the way they both had been since they'd arrived here... that constant mantle of fear that they passed back and forth between each other. Sunny didn't have time for it anymore. He told Basil everything was going to be okay, so now he'd just tell himself that, too.

*Why did it never work if you were the one saying it to yourself?*

The first time this happened, Sunny at least had the excuse that he wasn't the one who had chosen for the door to be locked. Now he had no one besides himself to blame for it. Basil really would hate him now, if he did this. The longer it took Sunny to open the door, the more Basil was going to despise him.

...

*Maybe he should just try to be okay with that. Basil had suggested Sunny could tie him up again, if he felt unsafe... but this was so much better, wasn't it? Sunny couldn't hurt Basil with this door standing between them. This door could protect them both. Surely this would be one solution they'd both agree on.*

He could imagine it perfectly. Every few moments, Sunny would say something to see if Basil was still listening on the other side, and Basil would do the same. They would pass their tired greetings back and forth from one to the other, until a third party finally came to save them from this terrible place. Neither of them would have to be afraid then. *Would they?*

*This way, Sunny and his friend could be safe from each other, while still maintaining their bodily autonomy. They could still derive comfort from each other... except through the door, now.*

It was the best of both worlds. The most effective solution to their current problems. Sunny steels himself. He should bring this idea up to Basil. If his friend needed to go to the bathroom but still wanted to be nearby, he could just use the girl's room next door... *would Basil mind that? It didn't really matter right now, did it?*

The figurative wall Sunny had been imagining was strong, but it would never be thick enough. It was just a product of the boy's mind, after all. But a ***real*** door? A real door could split them apart for as long as they needed. Neither of them would have to break through it

unless each agreed that was what they wanted to do. It was a democratic form of self-preservation that would temporarily serve to benefit them both.

It turned out that a blockade without windows was best after all. With a window, Sunny would always end up becoming far too drawn too the other side. To the person on that other side. But if he couldn't see Basil, he would be able to hold himself away. **This would work**.

...

*Sunny deliriously continued attempting to convince himself of the utterly delusional idea that he didn't have to leave the bathroom again. He silently watched his own reflection as the visage it captured slowly evolved from an insane person into an insanely stupid person.*

He's still running away. Like always. Still hiding himself away, like always. Mari would be so disappointed if he saw him now... sliding backwards like this. Losing all the progress he had made.

But of course he was going backwards. How else did he think this was going to play out? People don't move on from the kinds of things which Sunny did, they just learned to live with them... if even that much. Sunny was still living, so he must have been doing at least one thing right.

***Or very, very wrong***.

"Are you sure you're okay?" A voice from the hallway breaks its way into the restroom once more, but from a noticeably shorter distance this time.

*Sunny's entire body flinches at once, his mind instantaneously sent scrambling for a justification as to why he had locked the door between him and his friend... but that panic dissipates just slightly as Sunny realizes that Basil hadn't actually tried to open the door yet.*

*"I'm fine!"* Sunny responds a bit more aggressively than he intended, the sudden surge of fear agitating his tone. The black-haired boy quickly throws his used bandaging back on and re-strings his ridiculous Halloween eyepatch around his head.

"I mean I believe you, b-but-"

*Sunny finally manages to bring himself to put his hand on the door handle, although his arm is shaking. He hesitates for a moment...* ***before the handle starts moving by itself****.*

Sunny quickly unlocks the door and pulls it away from Basil as the blonde suddenly retreats and jumps backwards from the doorway.

*"Ah!"* Basil exclaims in surprise.

"Sorry." Sunny apologizes for scaring him.

"Uh- h-haha..." The blonde laughs.

The gardener tries to laugh it off but he can't quite fake it. Basil's expression becomes neutral once again as he takes a moment to recompose himself. Sunny tries to do the same, but it doesn't work for him at all. His pulse is still racing wildly out of his control.

Some part of Sunny screams at him to quickly leap back behind the door and lock it once more, but he ignores that irritating impulse and steps away. *He was done running.*

*Sunny and his friend begin walking back towards the lobby, the pair alone together once again. A few seconds of silence pass before Basil finally speaks up a bit.*

"The phones um... still didn't work." He states.

*You don't even need to say it. That's obvious by the look on your face.*

"The snow is c-clearing up, though... *I think."* The other boy tries to follow his previous statement up with something positive.

"Yeah, I think you're right." Sunny agrees.

...

"H-How are you feeling?" Basil mumbles an inquiry in his direction.

*Worthless.*

"I'm fine. Less dizzy." Sunny replies, his voice somehow sounding even more dull than usual. "How about you?"

"I'm, um... *I'm doing better."*

*Sunny suddenly feels an indescribable urge to scream in desperation.*

...

"Um... Sunny?" Basil asks.

"Hm?"

*"You shouldn't be wearing that patch without p-putting on a new bandage, first..."* The blonde quietly mumbles.

"Alright." Sunny replied. "I'll get one right now, then."

...

.....

.....

*Sunny stumbles slightly as they turn the corner back into the lobby.*

...

"Why don't you stay here and I'll bring them back for you?"

"Ok." Sunny replies once more. *"Thank you, Basil."*

*Basil nods and lightly scratches his face. The other boy watches as he speeds up a bit while continuing through the backend of the lobby alone.*

*Sunny sighs internally. He rationalized that it would be less effort for both of them if he'd just accept help right now. Whether or not it was safe for Basil to run off anywhere by himself was not for Sunny to decide. Even if he wanted to stop his friend from doing so... he couldn't.*

*Sunny turns back and walks to the windows at the front of the building. He gazes out at the abandoned vehicle which still remained motionless in the snow... but he gets distracted by the silhouette of his reflection sitting right in front of him.*

*Sunny stares at his face again. For some reason he was hoping his reflection had changed, but it wasn't as if the person in the window was going to be anyone other than the person in the mirror. There was no real difference, after all.*

*There couldn't be.*

# Encore

Chapter Notes

Fuck

*Sunny sits and stares out the window as he listens to his friend softly speaking beside him. Something strange was happening.*

Basil genuinely seemed a bit less ill than he had been the previous day. Sunny could not say the same for himself. Sunny was attempting to put up a convincing act, but the inescapable pain in his skull only ever dulled temporarily. His suffering grew in waves, always ultimately coming back again, each time somehow returning worse than before.

But in spite of their injuries, travel through the now-melting snow still seemed far more viable today than it had been since their arrival. The very-real possibility of taking a potential escape into their own hands was growing increasingly tempting.

*Or at least it would have been if Sunny even cared about escaping anymore.*

Regardless, Sunny could not have possibly convinced Basil that he was in the proper condition to travel even if he wanted to. It was entirely possible that the pair was safe to finally escape the strange building on their own, but the risks which had prevented them from attempting such a getaway still loomed over their heads. The snow appeared as if it was clearing (even the air outside seemed slightly less frigid) but both Sunny and Basil knew that there were still other dangers out there.

*Bears.*

Well, at least *one* bear.

Ultimately, the pair still held hope that this was the day that someone would finally arrive at the building to find them, and thus holding back on making any potentially-rash decisions still held firm priority over the pair's growing desire to leave.

But as much as he tried, Sunny still could not fathom their current situation. It simply did not make sense for a building so clean and well-maintained to have been left untouched and unmonitored like this, especially since so many of the goods stored inside clearly held enormous monetary value. Even if no one was coming here to look for Sunny and his friend,

surely someone HAD to be coming back to secure this place after its apparent abandonment? *Where the hell were all the people?*

Since returning to the same 'bedroom' over and over was beginning to grow increasingly tiring for them both, Sunny and his friend had decided to spend some time recomposing themselves elsewhere. Sunny was a bit curious to keep poking around the building, but seeing as he was not in the condition for it, Basil had suggested they take a seat at the front of the building instead.

Sunny was not in the mood for arguing, so that's what they did. The pair pulled two chairs out of the recreational room and sat them down side-by-side in the windowed hallway.

*But in spite of the increasing mundanity of the pitiful situation they were in, a sinister aura seemed to be filling the air around them.*

"-which is similar to holly, because they both have berries that are toxic to humans... but birds can still eat them! W-Well, most birds-"

*Sunny wasn't sure he should talk to Basil anymore.*

Or rather, he wasn't sure if he could do so without making everything worse. If there was nothing to be said that could improve the situation they were in, then maybe the best alternative really was to simply prolong their polite silence.

*And yet, Basil himself had begun talking. As if to completely pave over the silence that had persisted earlier, Basil had begun talking a **lot**.*

"-holly has sharper leaves though, so fewer animals are interested in trying to eat them-"

*It all started with a simple observation about the bushes which had been planted outside the windows at the front of the building. Basil briefly identified them before sliding into a small tangent about the vegetation and its peculiar medicinal uses. There was a short pause*

*afterward... before Basil suddenly resumed with a prolonged list of facts about said plant for seemingly no reason. One collection of pointless herbal trivia led into another, and now Sunny was unsure what Basil was even going on about anymore.*

*Sunny stole a series of carefully-measured glances at his friend. The blonde's voice was composed and his posture was normal. Basil slowly rubbed his eyes on occasion, sometimes even pausing to yawn in between words as if they were having some kind of botched sleepover.*

*Sunny felt himself grimace in discomfort.* This was all far too casual for their current situation, and *especially* too casual by Basil's standards.

*The gardener's friend couldn't understand it. One moment it felt like the two of them were at each other's throats, and then in the next Sunny was receiving a cordial speech about urban horticulture.*

Sunny had always loved listening to Basil talk about plants. He enjoyed watching his friend express that genuine affection he held for all of the small things which excited him. The blonde's enthusiasm was undeniably infectious. Sunny always wanted to hear the way that Basil's voice would change, and see how his face would light up in amusement. Despite his own lack of understanding towards such things, Sunny was consistently fascinated when listening to Basil praise the tiny green details which sprung out from the earth around them. Part of him wished Basil knew that.

...

*But the other boy would probably just think he was being creepy.*

Regardless, Sunny had spent years missing the smile on Basil's face, and his heart had ached to return to those moments for almost longer than he could even remember. Sunny had languished over losing each of them for what felt like an eternity... *and yet those same losses were always taken in by his darkest nightmares to be endlessly repeated.* But in spite of that suffering, Sunny's longing only grew worse and worse over time. Perhaps it was strange how torturous it had become to go without something which he had so easily taken for granted in the months before his sister's death, but *"torturous"* was the only way in which Sunny felt he could describe it.

*Sunny had missed the smile on Basil's face more than he would ever be capable of expressing to him.*

"-except the red berries on viburnum are actually edible, so people make them into jellies and stuff like that... h-haha..."

*But that's not what this was.*

Basil was smiling, but it wasn't real. He wasn't genuinely getting himself lost in something which enraptured him, he was just… *faking it.* Whatever positive emotion Sunny's friend was trying to display had turned their few remaining interactions into some kind of poorly-conceived comedy act. Basil was just attempting to drown out all the silence.

*What was Basil even doing? Was this supposed to be for his own amusement, or for Sunny's? Did he just feel bad? Was he only trying to entertain his friend out of pity?*

The enthusiasm on his face was a lie. It was a pathetic charade that he was putting on to avoid having to talk to Sunny about anything.
About what they had done to each other.
About what they were going to do if no one came today.
About what they were going to do when the two of them got back home.

*About what Sunny felt towards his friend.*

...

When Sunny tried to bring it up before, Basil had silenced him. Sunny had taken that to mean that his friend would eventually bring up the topic himself once he was ready. After Basil finally steeled himself, the argument which Sunny had been nervously anticipating for hours would finally come to pass. He'd been awaiting that punishment with baited breath.

And yet Sunny's expectations were seemingly misplaced. Basil was **not** bringing it up. He had not even once hinted at the idea that it was even a matter worth discussion. If anything, it was beginning to look as if Basil intended to replace their dreadful silence with something even worse.

"-with arrowwood fruits you can technically eat them but the pit is t-too big so it kind of just isn't worth it... and most of those plants don't taste very good anyway. Although I g-guess in situations like t-these you have to settle for what you can, r-right? Haha..."

*A never-ending string of meaningless noise.*

The unspoken implication seemed fairly obvious to Sunny. If Basil never stopped talking, then Sunny could never **start** talking. If Sunny could never start talking, then Basil would never have to release control of the 'conversation' at hand. The blonde had firmly asserted himself into the driver's seat, with no sign of stopping any time soon.

It was yet another attempt to make it appear as if Basil was okay when he obviously wasn't. He was trying to make it out like he wasn't upset when he clearly was. The blonde wanted to

fake some kind of normalcy in front of Sunny to keep both his friend and their actions tightly boxed away.

Basil was so adverse to addressing the wall between them that he had begun to cover up the entire thing. He chatted so casually now that it slowly became infuriating to Sunny… *all while adding brick after brick onto the now-impenetrable blockade which split them apart.*

Sunny had responded once when Basil began carrying out his one-man show, but he stopped talking back very quickly once he realized what Basil was actually doing. And yet despite his friend's silence, the blonde had only continued doubling down on the endless deluge of dialogue.

Sunny tried to calm himself as Basil's pointless rant continued. This scene would have almost been comical if it wasn't for the genuine hurt and fear lurking under all of it.

*Basil looked exhausted.* The weight of this place had only become more and more visible on him as the hours passed.

"-so it's more or less like rose water, except it's supposed to taste a little better... I think? There's this idea that-"

*Sunny scratched at his neck. Would it be cruel to interrupt this? Considering where they were, was it better to simply let Basil continue rambling to himself forever? Just let him continue talking in order to comfort himself? Did that even work at all? Was it selfish of Sunny to want him to stop? Please stop, Basil...*

Sunny wasn't sure how much more of this he could take. Even if he didn't want to make things any worse for either of them, this particular turn of events was slowly becoming more and more insufferable...

"-like the big fern by the kitchen. Young ferns are s-sometimes really good for you... even if they don't always taste the b-best, haha..."

Sunny couldn't deny his friend's act was also slightly unnerving. It was somewhat frightening watching Basil like this… *because Basil himself was clearly motivated by fear.* He was so afraid of talking to his friend that he had started wrapping himself in a cocoon. *That's how scared he'd become of what had been slowly bubbling to the surface between them.*

...

*Sunny bit his tongue. This wasn't fair. It wasn't fair to act like this. Sunny had never let himself become afraid of Basil, even after that night. Even with an eye now missing from his*

*head.*

All Basil had to say was that he didn't like him like that. It was not hard. Sunny knew it would hurt him terribly to hear those words finally exit Basil's mouth… *but this was even worse, somehow.*

*Could Basil seriously not just say it? Was it really easier to act like this then to just tell Sunny he didn't feel the same way? There's no way that could be true. Why was he so terrified of it?*

Maybe Basil thought his friend would hate him if he said that. Maybe he thought that Sunny would get upset and run away from him...

*Run away? Run away and go where? Go out into the cold by himself?*

*Sunny despises himself for it, but a burning sensation begins to slowly bubble up in his chest. He can't help it.*

*There was no point in acting like this.* ***Just say it****.*

Did Basil really think he was **that** stupid? Stupid enough to fall for this ridiculously half-assed act his friend was trying out?

Basil had acted so upset at his friend for "lying" to him and was now acting like *this?* Was the other boy building up to some kind of punchline that Sunny wasn't seeing yet?

Sunny feels himself growing angry, isolated and afraid. He knows it's wrong for him to try and demand that Basil stop...

But…

*If Sunny called him out on it, would that turn into another fight? Would he try to defend what the two of them were doing right now?*

*Would Basil run away himself? Would Basil try to escape again if Sunny cornered him with something that he didn't want to acknowledge?*

Sunny's mind continued running in circles as his friend's mouth kept leaking a series of unintentional threats.

They had both fallen back into an all-too-familiar pattern which the two of them had occupied together for years. Basil is the one talking while Sunny simply sits and listens in

silence. It was predictable and average behavior for the both of them. Maybe that's why the other boy thought he could get away with acting so... *normal.*

*With every spoken word that leaves Basil's throat, Sunny feels another tiny shadow squirm out of his head and float to the top of the room. Those shadows tried to hover away, but they had nowhere they could escape to within the confines of this building. Incapable of breaking free, the shadows steadily pooled just under the ceiling like a suffocating fog.*

*There was so much left to say and yet all of it had been silenced before those words could even begin to take shape. Basil had imprisoned them both.*

*Their cells were right beside one another, but Sunny could tell that two of them were miles apart.*

"-but unlike sprouts they can actually be fairly p-poisonous if you don't treat them correctly-"

*Blah Blah Blah. It was as if Basil's mouth was somehow wide open and sewn shut at the same time. Sunny felt a muscle in his leg begin to twitch. How much longer could this possibly go on?*

*If Basil really hated Sunny for everything he did, then why bother acting like this? Why continue acting so friendly with him? What was the point of all this empty dialogue? This never-ending speech about nothing?*

*Twitch. Twitch twitch.*

There's no way Basil still wanted to be around him if he was acting this way. Sunny's friend thought he was the worst. Basil was just buying time until he could finally get away from him. Finally escape Sunny so he didn't have to think about him anymore.

"-so people h-have to be careful or else they c-could get really sick, you know? You k-know what I mean, Sunny? Haha..."

***Talking.*** *The other boy just kept talking.*

She'd do this sometimes. Sunny always despised it.

Sunny would come home from school, and the two of them would be arguing again. Mari and their father would be locked in some kind of unpleasant debate, but never for any real reason. It was merely an empty show of verbal ability that never stood a chance at accomplishing anything. No matter how long they droned on, the entire cycle would repeat eventually.

"Mari. Your mother and I have already made our position on this very clear before."

*The tension in the air always became so suffocating that Sunny could practically see it, but the anger which slowly filled the room remained invisible.*

Dad and Mari didn't have heated arguments. Their arguments were cold and composed, logical and unemotional. *Sunny didn't like hearing Mari talk like that. It felt wrong.*

But Mari had to stay empty and detached during those conversations. She didn't really have any other choice. That was the only way you could ever hope to win an argument with him… *but at least it was possible.*

If you argued with mom, she would simply shut you off completely. She'd put down her maternal foot and stomp out the conflict before it could even begin. She'd reach out her hand and extinguish the flickering flame before it could be lit in the first place. That was her secret power as the matriarch of the household. *Her ability even worked on dad, sometimes.*

But their father was different, because his priorities were different. If one wanted to at least keep up the appearance of being entirely-rational and always open to discussion, they had to display themselves as willing to hear their opponent's arguments, *even if they actually weren't.* That was their dad's position, and one he frequently sat in with both arms crossed.

If Mari wanted to get through to him, doing so was always a strenuous battle. Every word she spoke to their father could eventually be used against her. Still, Mari knew that better than anyone. She'd face him down regardless.

*So their games would begin.* The pieces would be assembled on the board, and the two of them would make their same tired moves as usual. Sunny knew exactly which games they would play, and which pieces would be moved.

*But the games were never fair. One player always had twice as many pieces as the other.*

It would usually start in the kitchen, for whatever reason. Sunny would grab a drink from the fridge and pretend as if he didn't hear either of them.

"-there isn't any good reason that I can't, and you both know that. I'm still at the top of my class right now. Why is this suddenly a problem again?"

"It's a problem because it's clearly been affecting your priorities."

"My 'priorities' are just as straightforward as they have always been." Mari argued. "I even made sure of that, just like you asked."

*Sunny groaned internally, desperately wishing that they would both just shut up.*

Sunny wanted to just keep ignoring them, or to act as though he didn't have to listen if he didn't want to... *but that was not the case.* As much as he wished he could simply walk up the stairs and lock himself in their room so that he could no longer hear Mari's frigid tone, actually doing so was never an option. Unfortunately for Sunny, the topics of their miserable debates carried just as much consequence for him as they did for his sister.

The results of the argument at hand would determine whether or not the two of them would be able to see any of their friends tomorrow. The younger boy had no choice but to listen in on their little game, even if he himself was always irrelevant whenever he tried to be an acting participant on the board.

Mari would always become incredibly heated during arguments with their father, but Sunny had never seen much point in it. He was never as good at talking or as persuasive as she was, and so their father always seemed even less interested in Sunny's arguments than his sister's. Besides, Mari was always their father's favorite. Dad seemingly tried to hide that fact, but he was terrible at doing so.

*Sunny didn't mind. He liked Mari better, too.*

The boy exhaled and stretched his arms. Sunny just wanted to watch television. He wanted to come home and turn off his mind and escape from the boredom of a seemingly never-ending school day, but his afternoon plans had already been decided for him. Nothing to be done about it.

Sunny pulled his handheld out of his backpack and walked into the piano room, taking a seat against the wall. From this spot he could listen in… *but without having to be seen.*

"I've had enough of this. We clearly aren't getting anywhere. Why don't you go to your room and we can talk about this again once you've calmed down?"

"So in other words you know you're losing and you think telling me to 'calm down' will buy you more time? Nice try, dad."

Some days they were quieter than others. Sunny would have to strain to hear them from his hiding place. Their voices would become too soft, or they would turn and change rooms, so Sunny would struggle to listen without also having to be within his father's view.

But more than often enough, listening to the words themselves wasn't even necessary. Whenever the game had finally concluded, Sunny could simply listen to her footsteps as she climbed back up the stairway to their bedroom. Sunny could determine the way that the argument had ended from the sound of Mari's footsteps alone. *Step step step. Stomp Stomp Stomp. Step Stomp Step Stomp.*

And so Sunny would wait in his hiding place for the final message to be delivered, tuning in only if he felt like he could bear listening to the same argument be repeated for the fourth time that month.

*Usually, the topic of the argument was something mundane.*

*Softball was not a hobby that was "constructive" or "stimulating" enough.* That passion was a waste of time, an empty way to while away the hours and get some exercise... but a childish distraction in the grand scheme of her life. She should drop it.

*She got a 'B+' on her algebra exam.* She wasn't spending enough time studying. She needed to reorient herself and reassess her priorities to figure out what else she had been burning away so much time doing. Too much playing, not enough studying. She'd be going to college in a few years, and needed to be prepared. It was time to start thinking seriously in regards to her future.

*The cat did its business on the carpet again.* It wasn't learning how to use the litterbox fast enough. She needed to keep a better eye on it. It had been scratching the furniture. It didn't matter that it was still just a kitten, it needed to grow up faster… *and so did she.*

For so many arguments that were seemingly so minor, it was strange to Sunny that they would all drag on for as long as they did. It often appeared to him as if the focus of the game was not actually to reach a conclusion or resolution at all, but to simply beat the opponent into submission such that the topic at hand would cease to be a reoccurring theme in future debates. Sunny's father was a not a loud man, but he could be very argumentative. Mari seemed to have picked part of that up from him... *likely just from simple necessity.*

"Do you really think its appropriate for you to talk to me like this?"

"When you say *'talk to me like this,'* you actually just mean *'disagree with you,'* right?"

"Mari..."

Not all of their games were as inconsequential as they first appeared, however. Some were very serious.

*Unfortunately for Mari, Sunny had realized over the years that the more serious the topic at hand, the more likely she was to lose the game.*

That was because their father had a trump card, he just didn't always play it. Using that trick of his seemingly didn't allow him to come across quite as rational and detached as he liked to pretend he was, so he would intentionally hide it away. Besides, not every argument was properly suited to its use.

*Only the ones about their friends.*

When Dad started talking about Hero, then Mari would lose. It was a instant loss, even if Mari herself would never realize it immediately. The game itself would break down, and she would begin to unravel. Mari would only last but a minute longer at best. Dad could spell it all out for her.

*Hero was a seemingly nice kid, but not up to the same standards as her.* She could do better, and she *would* do better. This attachment she thought she had to him was nothing to take seriously, it was just a petty crush shared amongst children. First loves didn't last. Besides, neither of them had experienced any of the hardships of the 'real world' yet. Once their relationship was inconvenient, that boy would split right off of her in an instant. It was just the way teenage boys were. When she was of the proper age, he and her mother would find her a suitor that was mature and responsible. Someone truly deserving of her. Mari didn't understand right now, but she would come to see things his way when she was older.

***It was 'for the best.'***

Whenever it seemed like the things she cared too much about were also being taken a bit too seriously, Mari would be reminded of the truth: *her relationships were a side project that she was allowed to have only as long as she kept herself on the narrow path ahead of her.*

Dad didn't **want** to stand between her and her friends, but if **she** kept insisting on damaging her own future, then he would be a 'bad parent' if he didn't, at some point, *step in.* It wasn't all about her, either. She was the big sister, and if her friends ended up as a bad influence on her little brother... well, it was important for her to remember that *'family came first.'*

*Sunny's hands would tremble with rage, but there was nothing he could do about it.*

It was a dirty trick their father pulled, like throwing sand in your opponent's face. Sunny didn't even need to be in the same room to know how upset Mari was, but her own anger would finish her off.

Once you started to show emotion, that was it. He would lean back casually in his chair as you festered, and analytically decompose you from a distance. Dad would somehow turn even a minor, meaningless observation into a searing condemnation. The worst part was that sometimes, on the worst days, when he said the worst words... *you would start to believe him.* He'd stick his hands inside your head and leave you with something that you would be incapable of removing yourself. He'd make you feel unsure of even your most tightly-held promises. No matter how ridiculous his words were, he spoke them with a kind of finality which was nearly impossible to escape from.

Sunny didn't listen anymore once they started talking about Hero. Even he had a limit to how much of this he could take, and once their friend's name was dropped Sunny never saw any reason to continue tuning in. The game was over, and what came afterwards was just unnecessary torture for everyone involved. Sunny would walk up the stairs before she did, and lie down in his bed.

*On Hero days, Mari often wouldn't return to their bedroom immediately. She would 'go out for a walk' after their argument, and seemingly disappear for an hour or two. Sunny would sometimes watch her fuming down the sidewalk from the second-floor window. Mari didn't isolate herself very often, but after arguments like those she seemingly couldn't stand to stay in the same house as their father.*

Dad would never try to stop her. He didn't want anyone to do what he said out of direct force. Rather, he wanted to convince you that his twisted advice was a true reflection of reality. If you disobeyed him, or ignored his warnings, then that was simply you choosing to hurt yourself for no reason. He wouldn't often punish you, but your transgressive or disrespectful statements would become ammunition for the next game.

Sunny always told himself that he didn't care. Dad could criticize their choice of friends as much as he wanted, but it wasn't as if he could change anything about it. What was he going to do? Pull them out of school? Good luck flying that one past mom. *What would he say to her? That he wanted them moved into private education to safely separate them from all of the 'bad eggs'? **Idiot**.*

...

Sunny doubted that his father enjoyed any of this either, but if those confrontations strained him he almost never showed it. Mari would stomp out of the room, but he would simply take a sip of his coffee in response, acting as if he was working from home and the argument at hand was just another mundane corporate duty for him to carry out as swiftly as possible.

*But there were exceptions. After the worst arguments, if Sunny was still within the piano room, he could hear his father sigh with pain and exhaustion.*

*Dad loved Mari.* Sunny knew it, but he sometimes wondered why their father would ever say the horrible things he did if that was truly the case. Mari and dad never stopped fighting. It often felt as if the pair were simply incapable of understanding one another, or were too far apart to ever see anything eye-to-eye.

Sunny knew some other people like that... *but it was different with adults. Adults never apologized for anything. It was almost as if they weren't allowed to.*

But dad wasn't always like this. Out of the two of them, their father was actually often the easier parent to get along with. He left you to your own devices and allowed you to handle your own business. In comparison to mom, he rarely enforced punishment. He would just let you walk away without expressing another word. *Although Sunny found that such indifference often felt even worse, somehow.*

Dad was much less likely to punish Mari, but mom was more likely to take her side. The worst nights were always when mom wasn't home, which was fairly common. Sunny's father and sister would end up at each other's throats. Sunny often wondered if the two of them somehow telepathically planned their twisted debates ahead of time for the precise dates when mom wasn't around anymore.

*Sunny didn't think that made any sense. If Mom would take her side most of the time, why would Mari so actively submit herself to arguing with dad when their mother wasn't around?*

The younger boy carefully considered it. When both mom and Mari were disagreeing with him, dad was even less likely to listen. Even if the game was more likely to end up in Mari's favor with mom in the room, it wouldn't change anything about their next battle. If Mari wanted to actually convince dad of anything, *it had to be when she wasn't around.*

Mari still cared about their Father's opinion. She didn't **just** want him to stop disagreeing with her, she wanted to put him back on her side... even if that seemed less and less likely the older she got.

---

Sunny flicked his handheld on and off again, watching the logo appear only to send it away again. *Logo. Nogo. Logo. Nogo.*

From Sunny's perspective, she should have just given up already. He was never going to change his mind, but he was also never going to punish her for anything, so she should've just

stopped doing this for her own sake.

Sunny stared lifelessly at the tiny screen in his hands. *Why did they both struggle so hard over this? Dad was never going to concede, but Mari would never end up adhering to his demands either way. Once she was an adult, she was just going to do whatever she wanted. That's what she had always told Sunny herself, with a rebellious glint in her eyes.*

*Sunny exhaled.* He wished he had someone to talk to, but the two brothers were both out of town for the week. Sunny could try and escape to go see Basil, but Basil had still been acting really weird, recently. Him and Sunny weren't exactly fighting anymore... but it still **felt** like they were.

Sunny scratched at the side of his head. He could go see Aubrey... *but would Aubrey really want to hang out if it was just the two of them? What if she thought he was weird for even asking?*

*Sunny felt his face start heating up just thinking about it.* ***No way****. Aubrey was off the table.*

Maybe he could-

***STOMP STOMP STOMP STOMP***

*Sunny snapped himself out of his daze and finally returned his attention to the problem at hand.* The moment he'd been waiting for had finally come. Sunny pulled himself away from his thoughts just in time to listen to his sister's footsteps as they spoke their broken message. The steps she took were quick and angry.

*Mari lost today.* This was the most common outcome. Not ideal for either of them, but there were worse possible endings.

Although Sunny always dreaded the likelihood of seeing his sister cry, there was a third potential outcome which was even worse. One that scared him terribly.

*If Mari walked back down the stairs again and the game restarted, that was always* ***really, really bad.*** The longer the debate went on, the more likely it would become that Mari would lose, and the worse that loss would be.

For that reason, it was almost always in Sunny's best interest to intercept his sister before she had the chance to argue with dad any further.

*She hadn't walked back down yet, but this day was still particularly nasty. Sunny had heard the unspeakable name be mentioned, but it was very late into the argument... too late for him to have slipped away before Mari lost the game and made her exit. But Mari did not yet disappear from the house. She had loudly stomped back up the stairs, so Sunny knew that she would inevitably be in their room before her little brother followed in her footsteps. Sunny quietly braced himself.*

The young boy waited a few more minutes, lingering alone under the piano's shadow. He let a bit of time pass before finally walking up the stairs to see the damage that had been done to his older sibling. Sunny thought it was best if he took a moment to compose himself. After all, he'd be able to hear her crying before he even entered the room. He always could.

*Sunny crept up the stairs and peeked through their bedroom door.*

*Mari was crying*. She was staring out the window as her shoulders shook. Sunny's sister wasn't weeping very loudly, but she was consumed enough by her grief that she didn't seem to immediately take notice of her younger brother as he quietly opened the door and stepped inside.

Sunny didn't know what to say, because he never knew what to say. His silence was pathetic, but invariable. He moved towards the crying girl in front of the window and outstretched his arms.

Mari turned around, having finally taken note of the footsteps behind her. She rotated around just in time to fall into Sunny's hug.

*The boy hugged his sister tightly, but only felt a lump continue to build up in his throat as he did so. This hug was a token gesture at best.*

"**Woah**!" Mari exclaimed, seemingly having been caught off guard. She should have known he was coming.

*A moment of silence passed in Sunny's embrace.*

"T-Thanks..." Mari mumbled.

"But it's okay Sunny, really." Mari argued. "I'm fine. You can let me go now..."

*Sunny did not let go.*

Mari let out a quiet laugh. Sunny couldn't tell if it was fake or not.

*"Do... you want... to talk about it?"* Sunny asked, mimicking what she would always say to him when this situation was reversed. Sunny didn't know what else he could do.

"No thanks... it's honestly not that a big a deal. You know we just fight sometimes."

*Mari brushed him off again. Sunny's eyebrows furrowed against her stomach.*

"Don't worry little brother, he can't *really* make me cry that easy..." Mari asserted, running her hand across Sunny's head.

**Liar.**

*Mari would always dodge him. Ignore him. As if Sunny didn't know how upset she was. As if his desire to comfort his sister was something quaint and childish... some meaningless gesture deserving only of a reassuring smile and a pat on the head.*

*Sunny felt angry. He felt even angrier at Mari than he did at their father, even though that wasn't fair at all. She was the victim. She was the victim, but she wouldn't even let Sunny point it out... as if losing their rigged game was somehow a mark of shame that she had to hide away from him. THAT was childish.*

*Mari had always been there for Sunny when he was upset. If she's hurting now, why couldn't he comfort her? Why was that wrong?*

"Oh yeah! I've been meaning to ask..."

*Sunny's sister wipes her eyes with her wrist and pretends those tears were never present. With a single motion of her hand, Mari locks her terrible feelings away somewhere they can never escape.*

"Do you want to go to the library tomorrow? We haven't been in a while and there's a book I've been wanting to pick up for myself..."

*Shut up, Mari...*

"Hero says it's really good. You know he's never been as big a reader as you or Basil, but I think he's gotten a little more into it."

*Why? Why is she acting like that? Why is she smiling? Cut that out. Sunny wasn't stupid. He heard them. He knew that if Mari kept losing fights with their dad that neither of them would be allowed around Hero anymore. She couldn't just hide something like that from him.*

As he festers, the shadowy thoughts buzzing around Sunny's head gather together into little clumps, and those clumps form into tiny, wriggling hands that emerge from his skull and float up into the air. Tiny bits of unspoken suffering, each ignored by their unwitting creators. The squirming hands are desperate to escape but have nowhere to go.

"You know that one ice cream stand they always set up over there? They have that awesome strawberry stuff that Basil likes~" His sister advertised.

*Mari kept talking. She never stopped talking. She just kept on saying nothing. They were both in the room, but Sunny was alone. Mari had already left. She had judged her own feelings to be irrelevant, and so were her brother's. She had less and less time to be around him now, but even when she was... she wasn't.*

"He can seem quiet on the outside, but I know Basil struggles with a lot more than you think... you have to be really patient with him, okay?"

*Basil. Basil Basil Basil. Mari knew things between him and Basil had stayed a bit awkward since their argument, so she'd been repeatedly attempting to force Sunny to 'fix' the problem with her incessant nudging. Maybe she was just tired of waiting for them both.*

"Promise me you'll at least try to talk with him a bit more?"

*Mari had just been crying moments ago, and now she was once again trying to solve Sunny's problems for him. It was like she couldn't help herself. Sunny couldn't help her, either... so he just nods in agreement.*

*Mari smiles slightly. She seems happy.*

*Sunny closes his eyes and tries to dull his mind before she has a chance to start talking about practice again. Mari runs her fingers through his hair as she begins to ramble on about that accursed song for the hundredth time, but Sunny can't bring himself to hear a single word. His arm ached just from thinking about that stupid violin.*

*Sunny desperately wants to pretend that the hug they're sharing now is exactly the same as every other past embrace which he had long become accustomed to... but he can't quite manage it. Something about her hands feels colder now. A premonition of the end of everything.*

"-but I know you aren't going to be able to focus properly until you work things out with Basil. Ice cream might seem kind of dumb, but sometimes all you really need is an excuse to talk for a bit... *okay?"*

*At the time, Sunny didn't know... so she didn't either. She didn't know that their days together were running out. Sunny was going to ruin all of it. They need to talk about how she feels now while they still have the chance. None of this other stuff mattered. Sunny wants to go back and tell her but he can't. He wants to cry out to her but he can't.*

*She needs to say something else before its all over. Say she forgives him. Say she hates him. Say that she'll curse him for the rest of his life.*

*Say anything at all. Anything other than nothing.*

*Extend the scene for but one more moment. Play just a few more notes.*

*Please don't go.*

"If you like, the two of us could go get s-"

---

"-ome parts of the world there are f-forests where all of the trees are actually g-giant ferns..."

"I've always w-wanted to see one of those in person."

“I wonder how expensive it would be to visit a place like that...”

"D-Did you know that some ferns can grow to be eighty feet tall? Isn't that c-crazy? Haha..."

"Most of them stay pretty small, though… since they usually prefer the shade-"

*"Stop."*

...

"... Um?" Basil stopped.

"Stop doing that." Sunny demanded.

...

"W-What?” Basil stuttered in response, finally snapping out of his never-ending ramble.
"Stop doing what?"

"Stop acting like you’re just… **okay** right now." Sunny demanded.

Basil frowned. “I am ok-“

"No you’re not." Sunny grimaced. *"Do you think I'm stupid?”*

...

*Basil fell silent.*

...

“I just... *I don't understand.”*

"..."

“Is this really making you feel any better?" Sunny asked.

Basil’s posture shrunk and he lowered his head slightly. Sunny felt like a jerk... *but he meant what he said. Basil didn't make any sense.*

...

"I know I messed up, I shouldn't have done what I did... *but is this really what you want? Do we HAVE to do this?"* Sunny mumbled, miserable.

Basil still wasn't responding. He just stared at the floor in silence.

"You're starting to scare me a little." Sunny admitted.

...

Sunny continued waiting for his friend to respond at all, but no further words escaped him. Now that the conversation finally shifted, Basil had seemingly returned to complete silence.

...

*Something about that made Sunny feel angry.*

...

"Oh, what's that? You have feelings for me? Sorry, I don't actually like you at all. Anyway, here's my **top ten facts about ferns**." Sunny festered. “Fact number one-"

*Basil finally lifted his head. He stared Sunny in the face for a moment, glaring at him with tears beginning to form in the corners of his eyes.*

*Basil turned away again.*

"Why would I even s-still be sitting here talking to you if I d-didn't like you at all?" Basil mumbled, his voice cracking slightly. The blonde stood up from his chair and started moving back towards the lobby.

*Sunny steps over the line.*

"You know that isn't what I mean."

"..."

*Sunny's friend continued walking away.*

"You wouldn’t even let me say it-"

“Because I don’t w-want to hear it!” Basil cut him off.

"That isn't fair." Sunny stood up and began following after his companion. “Its fine if you don't like me back, but couldn’t you just let me expl-“

*Basil quickly turned and stared at him once more, anger flashing across his face. Sunny flinched.*

"**That's not even what I said!** That's... *that...*"

Basil slowly stopped himself and turned away again, a sudden wave of panic flashing across his face. He seemed to have slipped up, somehow... *slipped up in a way that had scared him.*

*“...that's not…”* Sunny's friend quietly trailed off.

*Sunny froze in place.*

Basil didn’t finish his thought. The blonde began walking down the hall by himself again, drifting away from his friend.

*Sunny's fragile mind scrambled to end Basil's sentence for him. '**That's not what I said**.' Not what he said? How was that not what he said? What did that mean? H-Huh? Why'd he react like that? Why was Basil afraid? Where was he going?*

…

*Back in the bathroom... Sunny had thought to himself... for just a brief moment... that Basil kissed back.*

*For but a tiny fraction of a single second, that's what he'd believed. Sunny told himself that couldn't have been the truth.*

...

*Could it?*

...

**He's getting away.**

*No he isn't.*

*Sunny sped back up behind his friend and reasserted himself once more.*

"Why is it so hard for you to just listen to me when I tell you that I meant what I-"

"Because you didn't!" Basil snapped. "You d-don't even know what any of that stuff means! You're just c-confused because-"

*"I'm not confused about anything."* Sunny stated, feeling a tiny hint of hostility try to slip into his voice.

"**Yes you are**." Basil denied. "You are clearly VERY c-confused about how you're allowed to 'touch' your friends."

Sunny shrunk back slightly. *"I didn't mean to do it... like that..."* Basil's friend shamefully mumbled to himself.

"And I’m saying that’s okay. *Okay?* So let's just… t-talk about something else." Basil made his statement somewhat angrily, but he was still clearly attempting to sound diplomatic.

For a moment, they both walk forward silently. Sunny considered his current position beside Basil.

...

"No. I want to talk about this." The black-haired boy denied him.

*"Sunny..."* Basil muttered his friend's name in exhaustion.

*No. Sunny couldn’t stop. If he kept letting this go, then they would never talk about it again. Basil would just ignore it forever. That couldn’t happen. Sunny would go completely insane.*

*Basil's companion hesitates for a moment as the shifting shadows inside his head slowly squirm into a hideous new shape. His head throbs and his mouth feels painfully dry, but the words growing inside his skull still manage to puppet his tongue somehow. Sunny asks an ugly little question that he knows he shouldn't.*

"Did... you not like it when I kissed you?"

***Basil's face immediately turns bright red****. The blonde's body lurches forward. Basil brushes a few of his hairs back after several of them suddenly attempt to obscure his vision.*

“**Stop**." Basil demanded. "W-Whatever you're doing right now it isn't funny. *Y-You're going to make me really angry..."* The blonde stuttered, trying to sound stern but struggling to do so through his now clearly-visible embarrassment. Sunny's friend didn't start walking any faster, but his movements became much more rigid.

*Sunny's own face started to burn red as he continued speaking, but he didn't care. Sunny felt intensely nauseous but he ignored it.*

"Would it... have been okay if it was on the cheek instead?” He asked.

"***SUNNY***. I am not j-joking. Cut it out..." Basil threatened.

...

*The pair continued drifting side-by-side. It felt kind of ridiculous that they were having a serious argument like this while randomly walking forward to seemingly nowhere in particular, but Sunny doubted that Basil would have been willing to have even a fraction of this conversation sitting down. The pair kept walking.*

...

"What if-“ Sunny started once more.

*“**Stop!**”*

“But-“

*"I DIDN'T!!"* Basil spat, interrupting him again.

"Didn’t what?” Sunny's eye narrowed.

"You asked me if I liked it? ***I didn't!*** I d-didn't like it at all and I honestly think it's c-creepy that you're even s-still bringing this up!!" Basil seethed, his hands trembling with anger.

*To Sunny, it seemed as if the world itself took pause after those words left Basil’s mouth. Sunny felt like he had just been kicked in the stomach. He felt like a brick had just been dropped on his head. Sunny felt as though his ribcage had been split apart one bone at a time. A tiny, shaky exhale left the boy's nose as he forced himself to recover from that statement.*

...

*Well, at least he got what he wanted. Basil finally said it. There was no reason to keep torturing either of them with this. Sunny could stop now.* ***Conversation over****.*

…

…

For a few moments, Sunny follows behind his friend silently. Both him **and** Basil seemed to hesitate in response to what the blonde had just said. And yet in spite of the conclusion he had been given, Sunny felt something nasty continue to bubble up inside his skull.

…

*"c…d'v… sh..d… er…"*

*Sunny muttered a short phrase under his breath, unsure if Basil would be able to hear it.*

*Unsure if he wanted Basil to hear it.*

"**What?**"

*Basil heard it.*

Sunny didn't respond, but to his surprise Basil finally stopped for a moment and turned around again, confronting him directly.

*"What?"* The flower boy prodded again, clearly irritated.

"If you s-suddenly hate keeping your m-mouth shut s-so much, why don't you just say it?" The gardener angrily stuttered, challenging him.

"…"

*Sunny tilted his forehead downward just slightly. His eye shifted to the side. His hands twitched. He couldn't quite look Basil in the face while it left his mouth.*

"You could h-have easily shoved me off the first time.” Sunny mumbled.

Basil silently stared at him.

“If you really hated kissing me so much it's kind of weird how long you just sat there and waited for it.”

*The other boy’s jaw dropped.*

"I... ***YOU****!! W-What???* How could you even-" Basil babbled incoherently, his mind clearly having been completely derailed by a mixture of searing embarrassment and seething rage that flooded his entire face in red. The skin around Basil's nose wrinkled as his expression contorted with fury.

"**YOU** k-kissed **ME**. **YOU** chased me up against the wall and and and-" The blonde angrily stopped himself.

*"Why am I even arguing about this?"* Basil asked, sounding genuinely baffled at his half of the current conversation. Sunny's friend let out a growl of sudden frustration before turning back and walking away again.

Sunny felt like he was going to throw up... *but he continued following Basil.*

Sunny was about to apologize... but to his surprise, Basil actually began taking the initiative to speak once he seemingly realized that the other boy was still tailing him.

*The blonde's tone came out venomous and it oozed a childish sense of spite. Sunny had finally cracked Basil in half, and something terrible began to leak out.*

“You don’t even know the f-first thing about any of the stuff you’ve been g-going on about. The only reason you’ve been acting like this is because we’re trapped here.” Basil festered, seemingly incapable of holding back his anger anymore.

*“Acting like what?”* Sunny retorted, squinting.

*Basil’s face somehow turned redder still, if that was even possible. The blonde hesitated.*

“Do you think I just ‘decided’ that I like you because we’re trapped in here?” Sunny asked, prodding him again.

“**No!** You ‘decided’ you liked me because n-neither of us have anyone else anymore.” Basil spat. “You’re just confusing yourself because of all the time you spent alone in your-“

Sunny felt the sudden urge to throw up. “That’s not true.”

*“Oh, really?* And who am I c-competing with, Sunny? *Hm?”* Basil hissed.

*“Competing with?”* Sunny balked. “What are you even talking about?”

“Y-Yeah!" Basil childishly reasserted his claim. "If there was a single other person stuck here besides me then you’d be p-putting your m-mouth all over them instead!!”

Sunny felt an incredulous half-laugh, half-scoff struggle to escape from the back of his throat. That would have almost been funny if it wasn’t so infuriating. *“**What?**”*

“Y-You heard me.” Basil doubled down.

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve-“

*“Right.”* Basil cut Sunny off and rolled his eyes. “Because you like **ME**, right? Like **Me**! Have you even h-heard yourself recently??” Sunny’s friend continued coming apart.

*A slight chill ran down the other boy's neck. Basil was VERY upset.*

“Yeah? And what’s w-wrong with that?” Sunny demanded, feeling the blood in his face burn hotter than ever. Two throbbing sensations in his head and chest began to torture him in sync.

*“What’s wrong with it??”* Basil mirrored.

“That’s what I asked.”

*Basil suddenly stopped walking and turned around. He reached out towards Sunny’s head and pulled the eyepatch string clinging to the side of his face just far enough to let it suddenly smack against the other boy’s skin when he released it from his thumb.*

“Ow-“

*“W-Why do you never care about any of the horrible things I say or do??"* Basil cried. "Exactly what part of me trying to **kill** you didn’t stick around in your brain, S-Sunny??”

Sunny readjusted his eyepatch back into place. “I told you I don’t care about that.” The younger boy hissed.

*"WELL I CARE!!”* Basil dismissed his companion and swiftly resumed walking forward.

*Sunny flinched. That wasn’t exactly what he meant…*

…

“We were both... *your grandmother had just died.”* Sunny stumbled on his words as he attempted to argue in Basil's defense. “It's not like you'd-“

*But Sunny couldn’t argue any further even if he wanted to, because he had finally ended up tripping on himself while trying to chase after Basil. He would have fallen flat on his face if he hadn’t managed to stop himself with his hands in time. Sunny immediately stood back up again, feeling more irritated with himself than ever. Having one eye was seriously starting to drive him insane.*

Basil’s own eyes were quickly rolled in response. “Sunny, just go back... you can't even stay on your own two feet...” He muttered.

“If I can’t stay on my feet then you can just hold my hand again.” Sunny suggested.

*“**S-Stop it**!!"* Basil demanded. *"That isn’t funny!!”*

*Sunny flinched.*

Sunny steeled his nerves and tried to calm down slightly. He needed to actually say something right for once before the chance escaped him forever. He was being a child.

But it wasn't too late. He could still fix this.

*Even if Basil couldn’t like himself, Sunny could still like him enough for the both of them.*

"Basil?"

*"**What??** What do you want?"* Basil growled.

"Can you at least just listen to me?" Sunny relaxed his tone again, trying to get his emotions under control before their argument continued spiraling. "Just one more time. I promise after that... I'll stop. *I promise."*

The blonde ceased moving forward once again.

"Please…" Sunny begged him.

*Basil hesitated. He rotated his neck slightly to look at Sunny. Basil looked afraid. Very afraid.*

...

*Sunny swallowed.*

"I… like you. *A lot.* Nothing that we've been through has ever changed that."

*Basil slowly turned around and stared at Sunny with wide eyes, his face seemingly petrified in a mixture of fear and disgust.*

*Sunny tried to keep his voice steady. His face felt like it was on fire. He couldn't meet Basil's eyes while the other boy was looking at him like this, but he tried his best to explain himself*

*anyway.*

“Even b-back then, for all those years... alone in my room... it was you w-who... I thought about… in every dream I had, I w-was... was trying-“

***“NO!! STOP TORTURING ME WITH THIS!! I DON’T WANT TO HEAR ANYMORE!!”***

*Sunny lifted his head and jumped backwards as Basil suddenly screamed at him. Sunny almost fell over as he locked eyes with his companion. The blonde’s legs trembled violently. The look of disgust on Basil's face had morphed into an expression of absolute terror.*

But that intense fear appeared to falter slightly as Basil slowly began to return to his senses. Basil seemed to hesitate for a moment when he took note of how badly his friend had flinched in response to that sudden outburst.

…

*The empty building fell completely silent. All Sunny could hear was the sound of Basil hyperventilating slightly.*

…

Basil rubbed his fingers against his palms. *“**I**...”*

The blonde started and then stopped again. Basil took a shaky breath and closed his eyes for a moment. He exhaled once more. *Sunny suddenly felt incredibly afraid.*

...

*When Basil finally spoke, he didn't sound angry anymore. He appeared to have composed himself as much as he possibly could. Basil attempted to speak to Sunny in a soft, somber tone that had become all too familiar to them both. The blonde slowly opened his eyes again.*

"Thank you... for always looking out for me, Sunny. I mean it." Basil began.

*Sunny felt a painful boiling sensation start crawling upwards from the base of his spine. Stop.*

"It always meant more to me than you could possibly imagine." Basil claimed. "You've already stretched yourself farther for me than I could have ever asked of you…"

*The unnerving feeling only gripped Sunny tighter. Wherever this was going, it was wrong. Cut it out.*

"... So you can stop now, okay?" The blonde requested.

...

*Huh?*

"Stop what?" Sunny mumbled.

"Doing… *this."* Basil stated.

"What does that even mean??! I don't under-"

"I forgive you." Basil cut him off.

…

*"F-Forgive?"* Sunny repeated, his voice failing him.

"For leaving me alone. I forgive you. We both know why you did it... *and I'm sorry.* It wasn't okay for me to act the way I did after all the ways we hurt each other. I'm sorry I got so mad when you kissed me, and I'm sorry for lying so much. I'm sorry for everything I said." Basil stated. "Thank you for always forgiving me, even when I know it still hurts."

*Sunny stared at Basil with his mouth half-open, struggling to form anything to say in response. Basil's expression was genuine, but his gentle voice still seemed painfully hollow.*

"I'm sure you and I will get out of here soon. We won't have to protect each other anymore... so we can still be friends! It can all be like it was before, okay? When we were just kids. I promise." Basil faked a weak smile. A cold, empty smile that hung lifelessly under two miserable blue eyes.

*Sunny hates that stupid fucking smile. He hates it so much he could scream. Fuck off. Go smile at someone else like that.*

*It wouldn't. It would never be like that ever again. Sunny didn't want it to be like it was before.*

*"Please, Sunny… I don't want to f-fight anymore…"* The other boy begged him.

Basil held out his hand, as if gesturing for some kind of agreement.

"We can f-forget about all of this. You and me can forget about all the stuff we've both said and done since we got here..." Basil's voice somehow grew softer and more fragile with every spoken word.

"We could just cut it all out and reset everything! Pretend none of it ever happened!"

*P-Pretend? They could really just pretend it never happened?*

The blonde continued smiling at him. "Everything's going to be... ***Okay****?"*

Basil phrased the final word as if it were a question for his friend to answer. The blonde extended his fingers out just a fraction of an inch further as he spoke, gently beckoning for his friend's grasp.

*This was Basil's offer to him. Sunny could say yes. All he had to do was grab onto that hand. A hand he'd known for so, so long...*

…

*Sunny didn't move.*

…

*Basil's miserable smile faltered slightly. Sunny's friend took a step forward, holding his hand even closer than it had been before. The depths of Basil's eyes were filled with something terribly frightening. A sorrowful desperation peered back at Sunny, silently begging him.*

…

"No." Sunny denied.

*Basil's fake smile slowly melted away, replaced only by a blank stare. Sunny's friend said nothing.*

“I don’t want for things to just… go back to the way they were.” Sunny mumbled.

“You… don’t?” Basil asked.

“No.”

*Basil rotated his empty palm slightly and then stared down at it. He continued staring for a few seconds before finally lowering his arm entirely. His eyebrows began to knit together in confusion, the look of despair he wore moments earlier already starting to grow back again... but somehow even colder this time.*

“Is that okay?” Sunny nervously asked.

...

***"Why?"*** Basil whispered, breathlessly demanding that Sunny explain himself.

“I still want to be friends with the Basil I met... *in here.* The one that’s…"

*Sunny desperately searched his head for whatever it was he was trying to say.*

*"... Real."*

*"**Real?**"* Basil mirrored and pointed at himself, an obvious tinge of venom slowly beginning to creep back into his voice. "The **real** one? This one right here?"

Sunny's face paled. He nodded slowly.

*The blonde's expression contorted once more.*

"**THIS** Basil is the reason you can't even walk on your own two feet." Basil hissed, gesturing to himself angrily while taking threatening steps towards his friend. "**THIS** Basil is the reason you obviously have brain damage-"

"Basil-"

"**THIS** Basil tried to kill you, because **THIS** Basil ruined everyone's lives-"

*Sunny tried to subconsciously take a step backwards but he stopped himself. Basil was barely an arms-length from him now.*

*"**THIS** Basil said to put… p-put… her… b-backyard…"*

*Basil started to struggle. His voice cracked. The words which he was trying to spit out were fighting against him. He closed his mouth for a moment and glared at Sunny, trembling with anger. Sunny's pulse was scrambling violently out of his control, but he still refused to move away.*

"Say it."

*This was going way too far, but there was no going back anymore.*

*They had been creeping around their shared nightmare for ages now. Neither had wanted to bring the truth up even back at the hospital, but the two of them were destined to talk about it eventually. Sunny had to press him here. If Basil kept hiding himself away from his friend then Sunny would never be able to reach him again.*

*Sunny wanted Basil to be angry. He wanted Basil to be angry at him for running away... angry at him for making him carry the truth alone for so long. Angry for how unfair it all was.*

*Basil was clearly enraged, but something about the fact that he had stopped censoring himself felt right to Sunny. He... wanted to see this. Sunny wanted to hear Basil saying what he really thought, even if it hurt. If Basil didn't open up to him then nothing would ever change. It wasn't as if the two of them could continue being alone together and NEVER talk about this.*

…

*Or maybe Sunny just wanted Basil to lash out. To lash out at him in the way he deserved.*

*But he still believed in this.*

*If Basil got his emotion out, then it would all be okay. That was the mistake Sunny had made. He kept his feelings stuffed inside himself until they all burst out at the worst possible moment. Now she was gone forever, and it was his fault.*

*That wouldn't happen to him and Basil. He would never allow that to happen. These words needed to be said.*

*This was the right thing to do. It was the only thing he COULD do.*

…

***Wasn't it?***

Basil stared at his friend, and his friend stared back. Despite the words which had been said, both seemed deeply afraid of the direction this was moving. Neither of them had yet shown the will required to break this momentary silence.

*After a few more seconds, Basil composed himself enough to steady his voice. He took a breath and started speaking again, but from a different angle this time. A sharp one.*

“Do you know how many times I tried to get you to open that door?”

*Sunny’s heart immediately sank. So much for forgiveness.*

“I lost count." Basil admitted. "I tried over and over to t-try and see you… because you were all I had. I couldn’t get you to answer…”

*Basil trailed off for a moment, seemingly hesitating again. Something held him back, if only for a moment.*

“... But he did.”

*He?*

*To Sunny’s horror, Basil began to smile. An eerie, unhinged, panicked smile. His mouth twisted into a manic grin, but there was a fearful shadow softly flickering behind his eyes.*

"You c-came out of your house for Kel but you wouldn't come out for me...”

*What?*

“I guess you j-just like Kel m-more than me, right?“

*Sunny felt something twist into his gut. The left side of Basil’s mouth twitched as Sunny's friend continued smiling at him.*

“Did you try to kiss him, too?” The blonde mocked.

*Sunny stood silently and absorbed Basil’s rage, refusing to say anything back. Basil was just trying to push him away. He didn’t actually think that. Even if Sunny could bring himself to speak, what the other boy had said wasn’t worth justifying with a response.*

*“**Well**? Did you?”* Basil demanded.

*Besides, Sunny deserved this, didn't he? The least he could do was take it quietly.*

Basil hesitated for a moment, seemingly taking note of Sunny's lack of interest.

…

"How about Aubrey?"

***W-Wait a minute, that-***

"I know you always had a crush on her."

*Sunny felt his hands ball into fists. His breath got a bit quicker. He continued staring into Basil's frightened eyes as the panicked smile on his friend's face only grew larger and more hideous.*

"But since Aubrey hates us both now, you decided to s-settle for me instead, right?"

*The beginnings of a sob caught in Sunny's throat. A hundred thousand words all jumbled up inside his head at once but he couldn't manage to spit out a single one. That wasn't true. Basil wouldn't say that.*

Basil laughed. "**Haha**! Is that what I am? A *c-consolation prize?"*

*Stop… stop it.*

"Couldn't have Aubrey but you knew you could have m-me?"

*Sunny was going to throw up. He still refused to speak, but he felt his head shake slightly in denial. Basil only continued laughing in response.*

"Oh, s-sorry! I forgot. You like *boys* now, right? *Haha!* ***Hahaha!"***

*The burning in Sunny's face grows so intense that he feels as if he's going to pass out. He digs his nails into the palms of his hands.*

Basil finally finishes his manic laughter. The smile on his face vanishes for a moment as the blonde seemingly thinks to himself. Basil breaks eye contact for a brief second, but then immediately looks back again.

“How about Hero?”

…

*W h a t ?*

“He’d always been really p-popular, right? Was he not your type?”

*Basil isn’t- Basil wouldn’t-*

*Sunny couldn’t breathe.*

That horrible fake smile began to crawl its way back up Basil's face... *but Sunny's friend appeared to start struggling again.* His arms shook with some poorly-veiled combination of anger and fear. However, Basil's tone attempted to mask all of it. His next words came out disturbingly soft.

“Maybe you could’ve been a consolation prize too, Sunny.”

…

“You’ve always looked just like her, after all.“

...

“I bet if you grew your hair out he wouldn’t even be able to tell the differ-“

**Basil fell to the floor as soon as Sunny punched him in the face, but he immediately started to stand himself back up again.**

**“WHY ARE YOU ACTING LIKE THIS??"** Sunny strained his throat as he screamed at Basil.

*The blonde tried to make it look like his manic smile was still holding strong, but it was a terrible act. His mouth trembled. Basil was clearly on the verge of tears.*

**“BECAUSE YOU’RE S-SUPPOSED TO HATE ME!! WHY CAN YOU NEVER DO WHAT YOU’RE SUPPOSED TO??!!”** Basil finally gave in and shouted back, his desperation rising to the surface once more.

**“WHY DO I HAVE TO HATE YOU??”**

**“YOU KNOW WHY!!”**

***“SHUT UP SHUT UP!!!”*** Sunny demanded. **“IT WAS MY FAULT!! ALL OF IT WAS MY FAULT!! YOU DIDN’T EVEN DO *ANYTHING!!*“**

*The blonde glared up at him with tears in his eyes. Basil seemed to take that as a challenge. He fell silent for a moment while he finally stood back up again. He got close to Sunny once more and began to angrily spit at him, his hands balled into fists.*

**“If I wasn’t there that day, if I hadn’t said what I did, then NOTHING would have ended up like this.”** Basil claimed.

**“You don’t know that.”**

**“*Yes I do.* It was trying to keep MY lie that ruined everything. You would have been fine if it wasn’t for m-“**

***“I would have been fine?”*** Sunny repeated back, incredulous. His face twisted in disbelief.

“T-That’s not what I-“ Basil responded, hesitating for a moment before beginning again. “I was the one who suggested it. What you did was just an accident. I was the one wh-“

*Accident?*

“-someone like me shouldn’t even-“

*Accident.*

“-everything would have- as long as I didn’t-“

*Basil continued angrily condemning himself, but Sunny could no longer hear him. The blonde’s voice seemed to fade further and further away as he spoke.*

*As if it was unavoidable, Sunny suddenly feels something horrible start thrashing around in his head. Something that had been sleeping through all the throbbing sensations which plagued him. It had been lying dormant for ages beneath all that terrible noise, but finally opened its eyes in response to an unforgivable notion.*

***An accident?***

*Right. That's what he had asked himself right after it happened.*

***'It was all just an accident, wasn't it?'*** *A sick little question, designed to protect himself. The beginnings of a barrier between him and his dead sister.*

*It was such a pitiful word to describe such a terrible thing. 'Accidents' were what you called Kel spilling a drink on the carpet. 'Accidents' were when a dog ruins an otherwise pleasant image of your friends.*

*Killing his sister was not an accident. Sunny didn't 'accidentally' push Mari down the stairs.*

*Now Basil acted as if he had the right to claim that what happened was* ***his*** *fault… as if he could even imagine what it had been like to live the way that Sunny did. Sunny had believed his friend would be the only person on the planet who'd be able to understand him, but he didn't understand anything.*

*Sunny didn't 'accidentally' throw his violin over the railing. He didn't 'accidentally' shove Mari in the stomach. Sunny did those things with his own two hands. He could still perfectly recall the way she felt against his palms during that brief moment when everything ended. It was the last time anyone would ever touch Mari while she was still alive. With the same hands he used to play that violin, Sunny ensured his sister would never hear another note.*

"You should smile more! I've always liked your smile!"

***Push.***

"Get dressed! Our friends are coming over today.."

***Push.***

"You're my favorite little brother, hehe.."

***Push.***

"Shh... you don't have to wake up yet."

***Push.***

"I love you."

***P u s h.***

*'Something behind you.'* ***Haha. Hahaha…***

***Sunny bit down on his tongue, and tasted blood.***

*Basil continued his idiotic rambling for a while longer, but finally slowed down once he realized that the other boy was only staring in silence.*

*Sunny cannot speak. The pain is so intense that it suffocates him. The rage is so powerful that it burns away his insides. Sunny tries to take a deep breath but fails. He tries to refocus himself but fails.*

*It appeared as if Basil could tell he couldn't bring himself to argue any further, but the blonde seemingly decided to deliver them both from the confrontation at hand. His mouth opened once more.*

"Do you want to know what I thought about on that night?" Basil asked, his voice suddenly calm again.

***Sunny stared straight into Basil's soul.***

"I didn't think about any of them. When I said we should hang her there… I honestly didn't think about our friends a single time." Basil summarized.

“I just didn’t want to lose what I had. I just didn’t want to lose the life I had gotten used to.”

*The shadows within Sunny’s skull swirled on in silence.*

“What they would feel… what they would think about her…” Basil continued. “None of it even crossed my mind. Because *that’s* the kind of person I am.”

“I don’t care.”

“Maybe you don’t... *but she would have.* And I think that’s all that really matters anymore.” Basil concluded.

…

*Basil turned and walked away a final time, seemingly confident that Sunny would stop following him now.*

***But he was wrong.***

Sunny stepped forwards and grabbed Basil by the arm.

Basil instantaneously ripped himself away and turned back to confront Sunny, but the other boy only grabbed onto his arm a second time.

***"LET GO OF ME!!"***

*Sunny did not release him. They weren't done talking. It wasn't going to end like this.*

**"SUNNY, LET GO OF ME, *NOW!!"*** Basil screamed, his eyes wide and voice growing increasingly horrified.

*Sunny couldn't do that. Basil didn't know how dangerous it was... if he left his friend's vision for even a moment, he might disappear forever. Horrible things always happened to Basil.*

*They were just fighting. Blaming themselves and each other. But friends fought sometimes. They could work it out, they just had to keep talking.*

*He couldn't lose Basil again. Everyone else was already gone. Basil was the only one left. He couldn't go. Please...*

*He doesn't understand... why doesn't he understand...* ***she never understands...***

*Sunny had wanted to stop talking, and she blocked him. She prevented him from running away, and it made him angry. He was only angry for a moment, but a moment was all it took.*

*Basil was running away now. Trying to escape. Sunny was the one stopping him. But Basil just didn't understand... what he was doing was wrong. He just needed to listen. If Sunny had stopped and listened, it would never have turned out this way.*

*That was the mistake he had made. The mistake that ruined everything. All it took was a single moment and Sunny had destroyed their lives.*

*He was sorry. He didn't mean the things he said, he just didn't want Basil to vanish...* ***just let him take it back... please...***

*Basil could be angry. Basil could be angry and say all the things he did...*

***But he couldn't run away****.*

***"GET OFF OF ME!! GET OFF GET OFF GET OFF!!!"*** *Basil screeched.*

**Every time Basil manages to pry one of his arms free from Sunny's desperate grasp the other hand simply reasserts itself onto his next limb. The blonde's nails scratched at Sunny's skin. Basil slammed a palm onto his face and frantically tried to force him away.**

**But despite Basil's violent, flailing attempts to break free, Sunny remains stronger than him. He won't lose this time. He won't ever lose again.**

**The grappling continues in Sunny's favor until Basil's left hand is placed on his face once more. The blonde shoves him forcefully, but the younger boy doesn't recoil until Basil's nails suddenly scrape across the cut and bruise on his forehead.**

**The sudden pain is so jarring it feels as if Sunny's remaining eye is about to pop loose from his skull. A trickle of blood dribbles down onto Sunny's nose almost immediately. The black-haired creature lets go of his friend instantly, reflexively clutching at his face and sucking in air through his teeth as his vision blurs.**

**Basil scrambles backwards and attempts to stand back on his feet, but he seemingly freezes up under the weight of his own fear. The blonde stares at him in horror as tiny droplets of blood begin to dribble down Sunny's face.**

**"I- I didn't mean to-"**

***Basil tries to apologize, but Sunny can't hear him anyway. It wouldn't have mattered. His sudden sense of rage swallows everything.***

***The dreamer stands up and glowers down at his assailant in fury, one hand still planted firmly over his own bloodied face.***

# Falling Ovation

*How did it end up like this... again?*

**What do you mean? This was what you wanted.**

*No… was it?*

**Didn't you want him to hate you? You knew exactly what that would look like.**

*No. This isn't what was supposed to happen. He wasn't... I didn't...*

**It's a little late to be complaining now, isn't it?**

*Despite how quickly the pair were moving, everything felt impossibly slow to Basil. His mind races faster than he can keep up with.*

*Basil had thought he was going to keep yelling. He thought that he was just going to keep fighting back harder and screaming back louder until his friend finally stopped trying to pursue him.*

*But Basil cannot look away from his friend's face. Under Sunny's furious gaze, Basil freezes to the ground.*

*Until the other boy moved again, Basil temporarily found himself incapable of doing so. Sunny began creeping closer, while Basil desperately tried to force his legs to do what they were supposed to.*

*Sunny takes a shaky step forward and Basil takes a trembling step back, as if their limbs had been unknowingly puppeteered by the same set of phantom strings. Every time Sunny forces his body towards Basil, the blonde makes another staggered movement in sync. Basil*

*struggles to find any more poisoned words he could use to continue desperately pushing his friend away, but no further offenses come to aid him.*

*The overwhelming fury that radiates from Sunny silences him by force. All Basil can bring himself to do is continue scrambling backwards.*

*But it isn't as if Basil could keep backing away even if he wanted to. There was nowhere left to go.*

Basil's mind was flooded, but a primitive segment of his brain still understood what was about to happen next, even without ever looking behind him.

*They are finally at the end of the display hall. If Basil turns around again, he'll be face-to-face with the top of the statue stairway. If he steps to the left, he'll be cornered towards the supply closet.*

If he steps to the right... *the staircase will be directly behind him.*

***The staircase.***

*But it wasn't as if... Sunny wouldn't... he'd...*

...

Even if Sunny really did want to hurt him, it wasn't as if Basil wouldn't be able to fight him off. Getting cornered wasn't going to lead to anything. Their fight would be over even faster than it had started. The correct choice could not be more obvious. Basil should back away and to the left.

**Basil backs to the right.**

*The expression on the other boy's face is one of hatred so all-consuming that Sunny could seemingly only glower in silence. Basil had never seen Sunny look anything like that.*

*Sunny moves forward again.*

*What had Basil been doing up until now? Who had he been saying all those horrible things for? For Sunny? For himself?*

Basil tries to take another step behind him, but he flinches at the last moment. It takes him a second to realize what he had done. Moving away any further would cause him to swiftly tumble over backwards. *Why did he go this way?*

*The look on Sunny's face steals away Basil's focus again. His friend's glare consumes him. Sunny looks furious... but there are tears on his face. Sunny is crying with anger. Its as if he was already weeping at the thought of yet another lost friend.*

*Sunny's mask had finally fallen off, and only SOMETHING horrible remained to stare back at Basil. Sunny raised his arms.*

***Mari's brother glared at Basil with a single deadened eye peering out from his empty head.***

*Ah... there it was. Basil realizes why he had backed to the right. He really couldn't do this anymore.*

*Basil finally stops moving away, and feels his entire body grow perfectly still as he watches Sunny's outstretched hands continue advancing towards him.*

*This was okay. No more running.*

*Despite how fast Sunny is moving in his direction, time only seemed to pass more slowly with every inch closed between them. An instant seemed to last an eternity. Basil wondered if it was like that for her, too. Maybe even the quickest deaths felt slow.*

*But in the final fraction of the final second... Basil closes his eyes. He knows how selfish it is of him to avert his gaze in this final moment, but he can't help himself. He doesn't want to see Sunny looking at him that way. Not at the very end, at least. He just couldn't take it.*

*And so his tired eyelids are shut.*

*The last of Basil's mind buzzes too quickly for him to make any more sense of it. Maybe he'd have been able to say one more thing to his friend if he tried hard enough.*

---

But if it was really his choice, and Basil still had the precious seconds left to claw out a single coherent thought from his terror, he probably would have pictured his friends one last time. The now-broken family he had lost. He'd have retreated into a memory of when everyone around him was happy.

A memory of when Sunny was happy, because she was still right there beside them.

Basil would sit at the bottom of the ladder, waiting for Sunny to finally wake up. Everyone else had already awoken and departed from the treehouse, but Sunny still remained.

The rest of their friends probably went home by now. Basil knew he should leave as well, but he could neither bring himself to wake Sunny up nor bring himself to leave him behind. He simply sat at the base of the tree and waited for his friend's nap to conclude.

Basil disappeared into his own thoughts for so long that he barely even noticed when Mari took a seat beside him. The blonde was about to express his surprise, but Mari set a finger to her lips. She leaned in close to him.

Basil couldn't be sure, but it seemed as if she was about to whisper something into his ear. He could just barely feel her breath on the side of his head.

A playful smile lingered on Mari's lips as they parted. Maybe if Basil had a single second more, he'd have been able to hear whatever it was she'd intended to say to him.

---

**But there wasn't any more time for that**.

*Basil feels his friend's hands finally reach his body.*

*Sorry, Mari. Goodbye, Sunny.*

Basil barely begins to fall over the first step before Sunny violently drags him forward by the arms. The two of them topple to the floor again as Basil trips over his friend, but that position lasts only a moment before Sunny grapples him to the side and pins him to the floor by his wrists.

*For a few seconds, Basil doesn't understand what happened. Sunny is looming over him now, even though Basil's body should've been somewhere near the bottom of the stairway... did Sunny fall along with him?*

*No... he was still beneath the looming statue figure. Sunny didn't push him back. Sunny pulled him forward.*

*Basil doesn't understand why. There's a strange ringing in his ears.*

*It takes him a moment to be able to hear it, but when he does, the voice assaulting him is deafening. Basil's eyes are held open wide.*

*Sunny is screaming.*

***"STOP DOING THIS AGAIN!! I WON'T LET YOU!!"***

**"I TOLD YOU I WANTED TO STOP, DIDN'T I? I TOLD YOU THAT I HATED IT, DIDN'T I?** ***WHY WON'T YOU EVER JUST LISTEN TO ME???"***

*Sunny is screaming, but Basil isn't entirely sure of who he's screaming at, exactly.*

**"ALL I DID WAS TELL YOU TO MOVE!!! WHY WOULDN'T YOU JUST** ***MOVE???***

**"IT'S YOUR FAULT HE'S LIKE THIS!! IT'S YOUR FAULT THEY ALL HATE ME!!** ***ALL YOU HAD TO DO WAS GET OUT OF THE WAY!!***

*Basil can't even hear his own thoughts anymore. For but a moment, Sunny's rage blots out the entire world.*

**"IT'S YOUR FAULT!!! It's your fault...** ***I'm sorry...***

The other boy's nails dug into his shoulder, but Basil could barely feel them. All the blonde could feel was a soft dripping sensation on his face. Someone else's blood and tears were staining his cheeks. Sunny pitifully sobbed between each of his furious condemnations. The cut on his head wept for them both.

***"Please... I'm sorry..."***

*Basil just doesn't get it.* He doesn't understand why none of the horrible, hypocritical, unforgivable things he said ever drove his friend away. Every additional thorn Basil grew was swiftly ignored, even though the blonde himself could plainly see that each new barb tore Sunny to pieces.

*It wasn't fair.* Basil had offered him a way out. Sunny had every opportunity to retract what he had done, and he refused. Was it really so impossible for them to just go back to the way they were? Was it really such an unforgivable solution?

...

*They couldn't just go back to being friends, because Sunny didn't like Basil as a friend. Sunny liked Basil the way that Basil liked him. That was the simple truth which Basil could not*

*escape from. The unacceptable truth that had forced its way through everything.*

*Seemingly exhausted, Sunny finally finished his tirade. Basil's companion slowly grew still. He released Basil's shoulders from his grasp and collapsed to the blonde's side. Basil quietly shed his own tears as he listened to the other boy angrily sobbing beside him. Sunny refused to let go of his hand, even though it was more than obvious that he lacked the strength to hold his companion in place any longer. They both struggled through heavy breaths.*

*Basil felt a pathetic whimper of frustration attempt to leave his mouth. It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair of Sunny to do this all over again. What could Basil have said that would have turned him away? How much more despicable did he need to be before Sunny stopped forgiving him?*

*It hurt too much to be forgiven. He couldn't take another second of it.*

*Basil feels his vision growing fuzzy through his tears. He's so, so exhausted. More exhausted than any person should ever be. If he closed his eyes now, maybe he'd just never wake up again. Maybe Basil's mind would fade into a dream so deep that his eyes would never reopen. Maybe if Basil died he wouldn't have to keep fighting his only friend for no reason. Maybe if he died he would finally get the condemnation he deserved. The punishment he couldn't help but seek out no matter how many times it refused him.*

*Basil felt tears roll down his cheeks as the other boy's hand remained clenched firmly around his.*

***"You can't leave... you can't..."***

*I know.*

# Rain

Chapter Notes

Thanks for reading. There wasn't originally going to be an upload this week, but I decided that I wanted to post one chapter instead of none chapter.

Have a nice day

*Basil slowly drifted down the sidewalk as he made his way back towards his home in the suburbs. He could still hear some of his friends walking away in the distance behind him, but the sad little gardener did his best not to think about it anymore.*

Kel and Sunny were in the process of dragging Hero to the movie theatre to see the new Captain Spaceboy film that Kel's brother had missed out on seeing with the rest of them the first time they'd went.

Basil stared down at his feet. His friends had informed him that he was more than free to tag along, but the blonde felt fine not to go again after having already seen the movie once. Basil didn't like to admit it, but the loud sounds at the theater always kind of freaked him out. He was never very good with all the constant action. *There was nothing wrong with the theater in principle, but ultimately books were just more Basil's speed.*

Basil waved goodbye to the three of them, and silently hoped to himself that Kel wouldn't knock Sunny into the street running as fast as he was.

But even if Basil hadn't seen the film already, he likely still wouldn't have gone... *though for a much more insidious reason.* Things between him and Sunny had been horribly awkward, recently. Every interaction between them remained strangely painful.

*A little over a week and a half ago, the two of them had gotten into a fight.*

The subject of the fight was, in retrospect, rather ridiculous. In fact, it was strange that it had even happened in the first place. All things considered, it was definitely Basil's own fault for getting himself so worked up that day. The way he had lashed out at his friend was both selfish and nonsensical. Sunny hadn't done anything wrong. Basil had just allowed himself to blow up because he was irrationally afraid.

Usually, when arguments happened between Kel and Aubrey, Mari and Hero would step in to mediate the conflict and help the two of them apologize or compromise. Basil and Sunny

could likely both have benefitted from similar assistance in resolving their own conflict.

But both Basil and his friend seemed to resist dragging anyone else into what had happened. Basil wouldn't have been mad if Sunny decided he needed to open up to someone else, but neither of them had done so. Maybe that was just the way they both were.

*Or maybe Sunny had done that to be nice to him?*

The way that Basil had lashed out was unfair. If Sunny had brought their conflict up to the others, then all of them would have likely taken his side, and been right to do so. Even Basil didn't understand why he had reacted the way he did. He just... *panicked.*

Upon looking back, Sunny really had been right from the beginning. It was stupid for Basil to think that his family would have despised him or tossed him aside over something so trivial. Sunny's family was nothing like his or Aubrey's. All of them were practically perfect.

And so Basil had apologized… *but it was horribly awkward.*

They weren't exactly speaking in private at the time, so the apology was a bit rushed. The two of them briefly talked behind a tree at the park... *and that was that.*

It wasn't his intention to force Sunny to forgive him, but there wasn't any other way around the issue. If Basil had spent any longer avoiding his friend, then it would have started to become obvious to the others that something was going on between the two of them. The gardener wanted to fix his mistake before that had to happen.

*Maybe Sunny sensed that.* Maybe Basil's friend saw right through him, and thought it was shallow that he was trying to so quickly rush through their conflict simply for his own selfish convenience.

Or maybe he was relieved, because he also just wanted things to return to normal? He'd seemed somewhat relieved after Basil had apologized… *but he wasn't saying much. Even less than usual.*

Sunny didn't seem mad… *but Sunny never seemed mad.* It just wasn't like him to be. That was the hard part.

…

Basil had never realized until now how strangely awful it could feel for someone to **not** be mad at you.

Hugging seemed kind of stupid at the time, so the two of them had sort of… *shook hands on it.* Basil tried to absorb all the fault. Conflict resolved.

...

But even if Sunny didn’t seem upset afterward, he had still been acting a bit strange since then. Every time the two of them spoke, there was still a lingering feeling of confusion which filled the air. Basil couldn't understand why things just didn't go back to the way they were before. It was as if Sunny couldn’t really look his friend in the eyes, which was unusual for him.

Soon enough, Basil began to feel the same way. More and more, Basil started to struggle whenever he needed to look at his friend's face.

So it was as if they both had started inching around each other. Basil was growing increasingly afraid that if he kept trying to talk to Sunny that something even worse would happen, so his initial politeness slowly transformed into anxious avoidance.

The two of them were not like Kel and Aubrey. They weren't used to any real arguments, and they didn't seem to be bouncing back from the one conflict which they had both fallen into. Basil started to wonder if his friendship with Sunny had been forever ruined after just a single dispute.

*Maybe it was way too soon to apologize? Maybe Basil should have waited longer.*

*Or worse. Maybe Sunny figured out why Basil had wanted to get rid of Aubrey that day and now he thought his friend was a disgusting freak for acting like that. He probably thought that Basil and people like him were creepy and gross. He was probably right.*

*Sunny probably never wanted to talk to him again.*

And so the blonde split off from his friends as they made their way to the theatre. He let out a shaky sigh through his nose and stared at the tiny cracks which weaved webs in the concrete beneath him. His legs felt heavy.

Basil was planning to go back home and water his plants by himself, but Aubrey and Mari had invited him to come back to Sunny's house for a tea party. The gardener considered trying to back out of it, but he’d already agreed to attend several times now.

*Basil's cheeks buzzed a bit at the thought of it. He was pretty sure none of the other guys in his friend circle had ever been invited to one of Mari's tea parties.*

Basil was still not entirely certain of the various tea party rules and regulations which Aubrey had instructed him on, but playing pretend with her was always kind of fun. Besides, Mari had promised that they could have some of her leftover chocolate chip cookies. So who could say no to an offer like that, really?

It wouldn't be that hard to force himself to talk with his friends for just a bit longer. Basil could manage it.

*Basil arrived at his friend's household and invited himself inside. He did his best to hold a smile as Aubrey enthusiastically welcomed him with an obvious sparkle in her eyes.*

Mari's parents weren't home that night, so the two of them were both acting a bit more energetic than usual. Mari and Aubrey sauntered about the empty house as if the two of them had brought Basil back to a fancy apartment rather than a family home which he had already been inside dozens of times before.

Once the three of them actually sat down and the tea itself was supplied, Basil finally started to feel as if he understood the general format of a tea party. It mostly just seemed like an excuse to drink a bunch of tea and eat cookies while sharing various stories and recent happenings that were too difficult to share during other, more mentally-intensive activities.

The three of them had always talked during picnics of course, but being by themselves inside of an enclosed, unoccupied space made the exchanges feel a bit more intimate. The slight increase in privacy seemed to hold some special power, even if the topics at hand were largely the same as usual.

It was, in all honesty, a lot more fun than Basil had been anticipating. It was hard not to get pulled into Aubrey's infectious enjoyment, and Mari always had a way of getting Basil to talk even when he didn't feel like he had anything to say. Basil could never say no to either of them... but luckily for him, both of his friends never seemed particularly keen on abusing that power.

Basil laughed as he watched Aubrey try to wipe an ungodly amount of crumbs off of her face at once. He wondered if maybe Sunny might want to do something like this with them one day…

*But as soon as that thought entered his head, Basil felt his mood begin to fall all over again.*

Regardless, Aubrey said Sunny MIGHT be able to come next time, but that she outright refused to consider the possibility of a tea party with Kel.

Basil thought that was mostly fair. Kel likely wouldn't want to sit through a tea party anyway, and he'd probably end up spilling everything (metaphorically and literally) sooner rather than later.

Mari had suggested with a smug smirk on her face that they could make Hero be their butler, or something of the sort. *Basil laughed. He could definitely imagine that.*

The blonde tried to continue laughing along with his friends, but it started to feel incredibly awkward doing so after his sense of awareness was momentarily shaken.

Mari's room wasn't just hers, it was Sunny's too. Laughing and having fun in his friend's room while he wasn't around made Basil feel intensely guilty, even if the other boy likely wouldn't have minded at all.

Or at least that's what Sunny would say. Basil's friend would give him that blank, unbothered stare, but the blonde knew he was always just trying to be polite.

*Sunny probably didn't want him in here.*

While Basil kept getting distracted by his thoughts, his two companions had begun combing each other's hair. They kept joking and laughing, but the gardener was almost completely out of it now. He began trying to come up with a reason to head home early before he ended up spoiling the mood for his friends, but Mari and Aubrey pulled him out of it again once their next hairdressing target had been chosen.

The two girls began combing through Basil's hair in tandem, but neither seemed to be making much progress... *much to their shared amusement.* Basil's hair was a bit of a mess, and had a fair number of knots in it. Admittedly, the flower boy hadn't been keeping the best care of his golden locks recently.

The brushing quickly came to an end however, as it seemed that both of Basil's friends were rather excited to move on to something a bit different. unbeknownst to him, a special event had been brewing.

Aubrey had brought some new clothes from home that she wanted to show off to Mari and began bouncing around the room excitedly, incapable of holding in her enthusiasm for the 'grand display' she had seemingly been anticipating all day. Judging by the swift removal of various garments from Mari's closet, it seemed as if Sunny's sister intended to get in on the fun as well.

Basil watched as the two of them took turns running back and forth from the bathroom, each time re-entering the tea party with new outfits. Both struck ridiculous poses with showroom flair. Every time Basil was sure they had finally run out of new garments to show off, he was quickly proven incorrect in his ignorant assumptions.

Possessing no replacement attire of his own, Basil had seemingly become the impromptu judge to his friend's fashion show. Both Mari and Aubrey would ask for his opinion on each piece, jokingly behaving as if the blonde's opinion was the final word on the matter. Basil's face grew increasingly red as their game continued, but he still managed to fulfill his judicial obligations.

Basil enjoyed watching the two of them have fun, but as the party went on he began to feel a bit self-conscious of the fact that he was wearing simple, tattered overalls to an 'upscale

event' like this. Maybe it was silly to feel that way, but Basil still felt somewhat out of place no matter how many times his friends encouraged him.

*Aubrey posed once again, this time wearing a bucket hat over her head. Mari joked that she might need a bit more time to grow into it, as the hat repeatedly attempted to sink into Aubrey's field of vision.*

Basil laughed. She did look really cute, though. The blonde wished he had brought his camera with him. Missing the opportunity to capture something like this was truly tragic.

*The tea-drunk festivities continued unbroken for a while until the entire show was suddenly halted by a very unexpected suggestion.*

To the blonde's surprise, Aubrey offered to let Basil try on one of the dresses she had bought. It was frilly and green, with small pink stripes which gently climbed their way up from the bottom hemming. Aubrey claimed it was one of her favorites, but she also said she had a feeling it would suit her friend perfectly.

*Basil felt himself swallow at the concept. Something like this was very new to him. He wasn't even sure if boys were allowed to wear things like that.*

It *was* a cute dress though, and the two of them were very encouraging. Mari politely assured Basil that the choice was his own, but Aubrey was becoming rather insistent.

Eventually, after enough laughing and prodding, Basil relented.

*If I don't like it, I can just take it off right away.* The blonde thought to himself.

So Basil took his turn, retreating to the changing room (bathroom) before nervously going about re-potting himself into a rather.... *decorative* new planter.

As it turned out, Basil *did* like it. He wasn't exactly sure it suited him all that well, but he liked the way it twirled when he spun his body slightly. The thin fabric was very soft against his arms and it made a very pleasant sensation when rubbed between his fingers. Basil briefly admired himself in the bathroom mirror.

The blonde emerged back into the shared bedroom to thunderous applause. Mari laughed excitedly and Aubrey squealed.

"D-Do I look okay?" Basil asked.

"You look *SO CUTE!"* Aubrey asserted. Mari smugly grinned in apparent agreement.

*The two of them let out a series of hushed giggles which quickly grew into quiet laughter, both of the blonde's friends seemingly amusing themselves with the knowledge of their*

*forbidden actions. In all honesty, Basil guessed that Mari's dad might actually be pretty mad if he found out she was using her male friends to play dress-up.*

Aubrey picked out a flower clip and placed it in Basil's hair. "There. NOW it's Basil." She claimed. The gardener laughed again as Mari mimed a camera with her fingers.

Unfortunately for him, Basil was having so much fun that he failed to notice the bedroom door swing open. Aubrey smiled and gestured in greeting to an unknown figure standing behind Basil. The blonde quickly turned his head back around to the doorway and immediately locked eyes with their unexpected visitor. Sunny stared at Basil in surprise.

Mari grinned. "Hey little brother! Check out your fr-"

*Basil was mortified. He quickly dashed out the room and ran down the staircase, nearly knocking Sunny over in the process.*

"**No- Basil, wait-**" Mari called, following behind him.

Basil promptly slammed the door shut as he jumped in the closet at the bottom of the stairs, hurriedly attempting hide his shame.

*The blonde couldn't think of anywhere else he could escape. Basil wanted to immediately run straight home but he couldn't possibly go outside looking like this. He'd accidentally left his original clothes in the bedroom.*

*Sunny wouldn't want to be friends with him anymore. Flowers were one thing, but Basil was wearing a DRESS. Sunny would know that Basil was girly and weird. He'd only want to hang around with Kel from now on.*

*Why did he even put this stupid dress on in the first place? He looked hideously ugly. Basil looked horrible and the girls were just laughing at him for going along with it.*

Mari gently knocked on the closet door.

"Basil, it's me. Please come out..." She insisted.

*Basil was NOT going back out there. Mari tried to twist the doorknob but Basil held the door shut. Basil heard Aubrey start to sniffle in the background.*

***Way to go you fucking idiot.***

Eventually, Mari relented. Basil heard her sigh sadly as she finally moved away.

“We should give Basil some space right now.” She mumbled from somewhere opposite the door.

Basil pushed his head to the floor and peeked out through the bottom of the doorway. Only their feet were visible. Sunny was standing next to Mari. Basil watched as his friend suddenly stood on his toes in the way he only ever did when he was attempting to whisper something into Mari’s ear.

*Sunny was probably telling Mari how creepy it was that she let Basil dress up with them like this. Sunny was telling Mari that he didn’t want to talk to Basil anymore since he was such a freak. He was telling her how weird he had been lately, and that the three of them shouldn't invite him over anymore.*

*Sunny hated him now.*

---

After his tears stopped and the house had fallen quiet, Basil finally twisted open the closet door in misery. Basil had gotten along so well with his new friends, but now he had finally ruined it. There was nothing left to be said. Basil would leave the dress in the bathroom, put his clothes back on, apologize to Aubrey, *and then go home and die.*

*Neither Mari or Sunny were standing outside the closet anymore. Basil didn’t see them anywhere, so it appeared as if the coast was clear.*

Basil quietly walked back up the stairs and slowly opened the bedroom door. Unfortunately (and much to the blonde’s horror), the room had a single remaining occupant lingering inside. Sunny sat on the floor next to his bed, quietly playing a handheld game by himself. Basil nearly slammed the door shut upon seeing Sunny's face… *but he stopped himself.*

*The blonde felt an enormous wave of confusion gently submerge him.*

Sunny was decked out in the single most-extravagant pink dress that Basil had ever witnessed in his life. He was wearing fluffy purple socks on his feet. Basil’s friend even had one of

Aubrey's bows equipped, that small bit of fabric crowning the top of his blackened head in elegant silence.

Basil's friend finally noticed him looking inside and turned his head. Sunny smirked and patted the floor next to him.

Basil sniffed and wiped his tears with his arm as he felt a tiny smile beginning to form on his lips. He couldn't help himself. *Sunny looked ridiculous.*

Basil took a reluctant seat next to Sunny's bed. Sunny quietly reached out and squeezed Basil's hand. The gardener flinched.

...

*"Y-You don't think I'm c-creepy?"* Basil asked. Sunny shook his head.

"Really? We're still friends?" Basil asked again. Sunny tilted his brow.

"Of course we are."

...

"You won't leave me behind for being weird all the time?"

Sunny shook his head even harder. "I wouldn't do that." He denied.

*"Okay..."* Basil reservedly whispered, resting his head on the boy's shoulder. He watched Sunny beat up a giant blue dragon in his video game while the sun outside slowly drifted beyond the horizon. The two of them silently sat with one another until Sunny finally shut off his game and they both started to nod off.

Sunny's room felt much more comfortable now that he was in it. For the first time in a long while... *Basil felt himself relax a little.*

...

Hero poked his head in through the door and called into the darkened room. *"Psst, Basil? Are you still here?"*

*His eyes seemingly landed on the two of them.*

“Oops. My bad~” he whispered.

*The door closed again.*

---

*Basil woke up to the sound of heavy rain echoing through an empty building.*

It took him a surprisingly long time to remember what was happening. He couldn’t remember falling asleep… *or passing out.* Basil had completely lost his sense of the passage of time. He might have closed his eyes a few minutes ago, or he might have closed them a few weeks ago.

...

*Did it even matter anymore?*

The blonde spent a brief few moments listening to the quiet pattering of rain beating across the side of the building. Despite what an innocuous tone it created, Basil still thought it sounded rather strange for some reason. He wasn’t really sure why… *until the feelings suddenly bubbled up all at once.*

*It wasn’t the sound he heard that struck him as odd, but the sound that he didn’t. The constant, guilt-ridden chatter which usually scrambled and twisted within the insides of the boy’s head was temporarily absent. All the roiling self-deprecation had faded away into a gentle nothingness. Everything had all been replaced by a shockingly poignant silence. For but a single moment, all that existed was the rain.*

...

*It was as if someone had flipped a restart switch on the back of Basil’s head. It seemed that too much had been rushing through it as of late, and thus Basil’s mind chose to finally let out everything at once.*

*For a precious few seconds in this brief transition between wakefulness and sleep, Basil is not himself.*

*But that peace never lasts.*

...

**The sound of the rain loses focus as a sudden rush of panic surges through Basil**.

Basil's body suddenly jerks forward on impulse, violently attempting to free itself from the restraints which had been wrapped around his hands… *before quickly relaxing again.*

*There were no restraints anymore. He wasn't tied to anything. That was ages ago, now… Sunny wouldn't…*

***Sunny***.

Basil's brain finally shakes itself into consciousness. The blonde quickly but silently attempts to locate his missing companion.

*Doing so barely takes even a second, as Sunny had seemingly been beside him the entire time. Sunny was right next to him. Basil just hadn't taken notice yet.*

*Sunny was always perfectly silent whenever he was sitting still. Silent enough that Basil assumed almost anyone could fall asleep right beside him.*

Strangely, Sunny wasn't wearing pink anymore… *because that was just a dream.* Just a dream.

Sunny sat immediately to Basil's left, the boy's legs held closely together as he leaned upright against the bedroom-side wall of the furniture display hallway. His face was no longer dripping with blood.

Basil was sprawled across the cold floor with a pillow under his head… *again.* It almost seemed like a bad joke, all things considered. At least they were at the top of the stairs this time.

For a moment, it almost felt like all of it was just a nightmare. After all, it had to be a nightmare, right? If Basil had really said all the things that he remembered, then there's no way Sunny would still be sitting quietly beside him now. Sunny wouldn't just forgive something like that.

*Or so Basil would have liked to believe... but he knew that was not the truth.*

Basil could tell from the way that Sunny was sitting that his friend must have been wide awake. He also knew Sunny must have already known the gardener was awake as well, as Basil's body had visibly jerked forward in fear just a moment ago.

*Sunny knows he's awake. He's…*

***Say something**. Basil has to say… something.*

"I **do** like listening to you talk about plants." Sunny suddenly spoke.

…

"What?" Basil asked.

"I like how you can always tell me something new about them, even when you act like you don't know that much." Sunny explained.

...

"What are you talk-"

"Shut up." Sunny demanded.

"…"

"I like the books you read, and the way you'd read them aloud to me…"

"…"

“I like-“

“Sunny-“ Basil tried to interrupt.

“Shut. Up.”

*Basil shut up.*

“I like how you’d constantly try to keep me positive, even though I think you might have been the one who needed that more.”

Sunny’s friend stared at the floor.

“I like how you’d take photos of our friends… *even though you’d never ask any of us first.”* The corner of Sunny’s mouth briefly lifted, a tiny smile almost imperceptibly flashing across his face.

"..."

“I like how you always try to emphasize the best parts of people, even when those parts are small.”

"..."

*"Very small."*

"..."

“I like how when we’d get into trouble you’d always worry about everyone… even if I wished you didn’t feel like you had to… *if t-that makes sense.”* Sunny stumbled.

*That was only because Basil was so afraid of everything.*

“I like how you keep your memories of your friends in a photo album. I like how you kept that album... even after everything that happened.”

*That was just because he could never let go of anything.*

…

“I like how instead of killing spiders in the house you put a glass over them and carry them into the garden, even though spiders are really creepy and gross...”

*Basil felt a sob trying to build in his throat.*

…

*Sunny hesitated.*

…

“I like how even after everything, that you still never gave up on me. I never properly thanked you for that. I don’t deserve it.”

*Basil tried to open his mouth but he couldn’t. He tried to keep his lip from quivering but it was too obvious. Sunny glanced at his friend’s face and then took a deep breath before speaking again.*

*Basil could see in his peripheral vision that his friend had begun squirming slightly. Fidgeting. Sunny’s face became pink. His lips were tight and something about his expression seemed a bit off.*

…

*“I like… the way you s-smile… and stuff…”*

*“I get it…”* Basil grumbled, his own face beginning to burn red in return.

“No you don’t. You never get anything.” Sunny grumbled back at him, eyebrows lowering once more.

…

“Neither do you.” Basil muttered.

“Yeah.” Sunny agreed.

…

*The rain gently underlined their shared silence.*

…

“How do you feel.” Sunny asked. *It didn’t really come off like a question.*

“Bad.” Basil admitted.

…

“How do **you** feel?” Basil returned the inquiry.

“Awful.”

…

"Sorry about your face." Sunny apologized.

*Basil suddenly gained a slightly-increased awareness of the minor ache emanating from his now re-bruised eye.*

"That's okay." Basil reassured him.

...

“Do you think we’re going to die in here?” Basil asked.

“No.” Sunny denied.

…

*The black haired boy slowly turned and stared down into the empty stairway beneath them.*

“Are you going to keep trying to?”

*Basil’s arms tensed. He felt the burning sensation in his stomach twist slightly.*

*Basil felt as if he spoke any further that he might lose himself, or that if he let himself cry now he might disappear into it. He felt that if he shed a single tear he would start to weep like a child.*

*Basil exhaled and squeezed his eyes shut. He shook his head back and forth as best he could.*

“N-No...” Basil lied.

…

*“Good.”* Sunny concluded.

To Basil’s surprise, his friend immediately stands up without warning. Sunny pulls his arm off of Basil and gets up on his feet. The other boy began walking to the display bedroom by himself.

Astonishingly, Basil's associate didn’t show any signs of struggle. Sunny walked slowly and casually, without any visible difficulties. He wiped the front of his face with his hand as he moved away.

Basil wanted to open his mouth and say something to Sunny before he just walked off by himself like that, but the shock he felt immediately silenced him. The blonde’s mouth fell open but no sound left it. Basil watched as Sunny opened the door to their sleeping quarters and stepped inside.

...

Basil lingered on the floor by himself, feeling more useless than he had ever felt in his entire life... *though his self-loathing was short-lived.*

Sunny returned from the bedroom only seconds later, now carrying a grape soda can and a bottle of water alongside him.

“For you.” Sunny bent over and placed the can in front of Basil before sitting down beside him once more.

“No, that’s okay…" Basil shook his head. "I’ll take the water… you can have the-“

*“For. You.”* Sunny re-emphasized his carbonated purple tribute.

The blonde sighed through his nose and accepted Sunny’s gift. Basil was never much for these sweet, syrupy beverages... but if his friend was going to keep bugging him about this then it seemed easier to just play along for now.

*The blonde accepted his companion’s olive branch. Basil momentarily rotated the can in his hands, briefly inspecting it for no particular reason. He gently popped the tab. It let out a quiet hiss.*

Basil took a small sip from the can. *Sweet.* This stuff never really tasted bad, but Basil didn't think it tasted much like grapes at all. It was the sort of artificial flavor that he couldn’t really attribute to anything else. Not grapes, just… *sugar and chemicals.* He couldn't judge it too harshly, though. It probably wasn't intended to be served lukewarm.

Basil exhaled and placed the soda on the floor between his legs.

*The blonde had only set his can on the ground for roughly a half-second before Sunny swiftly picked up the object himself and immediately took a sip from the metal container which had been touching Basil’s lips a single moment prior.*

“Wh- *Hey!”* Basil protested, feeling a confusing surge of annoyance and embarrassment jump into his face at Sunny’s sudden transgression.

“I t-thought you s-said it was for me?” The blonde stuttered in surprise as he watched Sunny continue casually drinking from the can which he had forcefully reclaimed.

After another casual sip, Sunny finally removed the can from his mouth. “It WAS for you.”

“Now it’s for ME.” He asserted, taking a sip once more, clearly prolonging the motion on purpose.

*Basil watched Sunny with an expression of disbelief as the other boy wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before placing the can back in front of him.*

“Now it’s for you again.” Sunny clarified.

Basil scoffed. “If you wanted some you could have just said so.”

“I guess.” Sunny brushed him off.

…

He knew it was childish, but Basil felt a brief hint of genuine annoyance arise in response to his friend's repeated jabbing. He almost couldn't believe Sunny was still acting like this.

*Basil drank from the can again. His friend probably thought he was too squeamish for it and was trying to make fun of him, but Sunny was wrong. Basil wasn’t the only one who could still get embarrassed in a situation like this, and he could prove it.*

Basil set the can back down, but to his surprise, Sunny didn’t seem particularly embarrassed by the return of his own indirect kiss. Sunny’s expression remained blank, though something about the look on his face still seemed rather intense to Basil. The blonde couldn’t read him… *but he appeared to be a bit lost in thought.*

Unfortunately, that momentary distraction would be Basil's downfall. The blonde absentmindedly placed his can back on the floor, and it was once again immediately commandeered by his eyepatched associate. Sunny took a quick sip and placed the can back between them in little more than an instant. He didn't even bother to rotate his head that time.

*The blonde felt his face continue heating up as he stared at the drink they were both sharing, now. This was so stupid.*

...

“Weren’t we just fighting?” Basil mumbled to himself.

“I guess.” Sunny replied.

…

“You know… I don’t think I’ve ever actually fought with anyone besides you.” Basil admitted.

*“Is that bad?”* Sunny asked.

“I don’t know...”

…

“Why can I never hate you?” Basil exhaled.

*Sunny said nothing.*

...

“Do you really... *not hate me?”* Basil couldn't help himself.

Sunny childishly scowled at the floor. “If I say ‘**No**’ again, would you actually believe me this time?”

…

“Probably not.” Basil admitted.

“Then what should I say?”

“I d-don’t know…”

“Then tell me once you think of it, and I’ll say that instead.” Sunny concluded.

…

“Alright...” Basil agreed.

…

"Hey, Sunny?"

*"Yeah?"*

“Do you remember how you said you were glad that I hadn’t changed since we last met?” Basil asked.

“Yeah?”

“Did you really mean that?”

...

“Yeah.”

“I felt the same way.” The blonde admitted.

“…”

“When I saw you again… I'd thought to myself… that you looked exactly the same as I’d remembered.” Basil summarized.

*Sunny listened silently.*

“And as scary as it was to see you after so long... it was still the first time in years that I felt like… *maybe I’d be able to take a step forward.”*

“…”

“When Kel said you were leaving…”

*Basil’s friend flinched.*

“I felt like I finally fell apart. It felt like, until that moment, I’d still been holding onto a tiny bit of hope that everything would go back to the way it was before… *somehow.”*

"..."

"Even though I know how stupid that is."

“Sorry.” Sunny mumbled.

*Basil shook his head.* “But in a strange way… it almost made sense to me. Maybe I did change… or maybe you changed… or….”The boy trailed off for a moment, pausing to think.

“I guess... the idea of *‘my best friend Sunny’* that I still had in my head… was also the idea of someone that would never forgive me for anything.” Basil stared at the floor.

“What do you mean?” Sunny asked.

“I think I had been carrying some kind of weird hope that it was all a misunderstanding. That I didn’t actually see what I thought I did.” Basil explained.

“…”

“I think I needed to believe that, because that meant you could still be the perfect person that you had been inside of my head… and if you *were* that person, then that also meant you would eventually come back for me.” Basil explained. “So I kept trying to convince myself of something I knew couldn’t be true.”

*“Something behind you.”* Sunny mumbled.

Basil nodded. “Yeah.”

...

“But because my idea of you was perfect… that also meant that person would never be able to forgive me for what I did.” The blonde paused again.

“…”

“Because there’s no way a perfect person could forgive… *s-someone like that,* you know?” Basil trembled.

...

“Basil.”

“…”

“I killed Mari.”

…

*Basil took a deep breath.*

*“Yeah. You did.”*

---

“I’m sorry about all that stuff I said.” Basil apologized.

“Me too.” Sunny apologized back.

Basil shook his head. “Don’t be. At least you’ve been *trying* to tell the truth. All I’ve done this entire time is lie and lie and lie…”

…

“Then if I promise to stop lying, will you promise back?” Sunny suggested.

Basil let out a half-laugh, half-sob. *“Okay.”* He agreed.

“It's a promise?”

…

“P-Promise.”

…

*“I have something I need to tell you.”* Sunny’s tone shifted slightly.

Basil’s breath hitched.

…

“Okay.” He confirmed.

“When I…” Sunny began.

…

“K-Kissed you, before…”

*Basil’s heartbeat rapidly increased.*

“I… *was* lying. A little bit.”

“…”

**Lying**. Lying. *Lying?* Lying.

“I thought maybe if you knew I liked you… in that way… t-that you wouldn’t do something like that to m… *to yourself.”* Sunny corrected.

…

*L- Um? Oh…*

“Since you never told me you tried to hurt yourself that night… I was scared that… you still wanted to do something like that.”

*Scared. Sunny was scared he would kill himself.*

"I..." Basil stumbled.

“I thought… in that moment… that I had to save you. Or s-something. Save you the way you saved me.” Sunny explained.

*Basil didn't really understand what that meant.*

“It was all I could think of. *I panicked.”*

…

“T-That’s… it’s okay, r-really…” Basil mumbled, his face quickly heating up again.

"No it wasn't." Sunny denied.

“I’m sorry I forced something gross onto you like that.” Basil's friend exhaled. *"It'll never happen again.* I promise."

…

*The rain outside roiled loudly. The thoughts inside Basil’s head buzzed silently.*

*Sunny was similarly quiet, as if waiting for his friend to take his turn to speak. Waiting for his companion to come up with words that Basil simply didn’t have. Sunny didn't seem to know what else there was to say.*

*And as they both lingered in that panicked silence,* ***a strange little feeling inside of Basil suddenly started to scramble in circles****.*

*A scary little feeling. A tiny fragment of misplaced hope... or quiet desperation.*

*It was a vain feeling. An entirely self-obsessed and self-destructive impulse that Basil knew would ruin him if he addressed it even for a moment.*

*It was a tiny feeling that begged to be let out into the lingering silence which throbbed painfully between Basil and his friend. A tiny feeling that would destroy them both.*

But Basil wouldn't… couldn't…

*He'd never be able to say something like that. He'd rather die.*

Regardless, that squirming little feeling begins to build up in Basil's throat as if prompting him to speak.

*And, against his better judgement,* ***that's exactly what he does****.*

...

"I d-didn't r-really mean… w-what I said… earlier…" Basil stuttered heavily, feeling his breath shake slightly as it passed through him.

*The other boy's body noticeably tensed. Basil's friend had taken notice of his obvious struggle.*

"What you said?" Sunny mirrored.

…

"I didn't really *h-hate* it…"

"…"

"When you k-kissed me, I m-mean. I was j-just... *s-surprised,* I guess..."

…

"Oh." Sunny replied.

…

“Okay.” Sunny confirmed.

…

*Basil’s face felt like it was melting. He could feel his heart trying to wrestle its way out from his chest. Sunny was no more quiet than usual, but that silence felt unfathomably loud in this moment, the unbearable emptiness now twice as excruciating as it had been before.*

*The blonde stared into the floor, feeling a dizzying sense of vertigo flooding through his skull. Basil regretted what he said the exact moment the unforgivable admission left his lips. His mind violently thrashed in a rush of attempts to escape this terrible silence. He needed to take it back. There had to be some way he could undo himself.*

What that looked like didn’t even matter. He just n-needed to… just…

*He’d-*

“**Just j-joking, haha!!**” Basil stuttered heavily, his arms suddenly twitching as his voice spiked upward in volume. “T-That’s w-what you get for t-teasing me earlier!!”

Basil tried to lift his eyes off the ground in an attempt to better sell his obvious lie, but the idea of rotating his head to look at Sunny now felt like an impossible t-

“Ha, h-haha!! *Ha.. hah..”*

*Basil’s panicked laughter stalled as he flinched in response to his friend’s sudden touch. Sunny had planted a hand on his arm.*

“It’s- j-just... I m-mean-“

Basil continued stuttering out his desperate justification as he finally forced himself to lift his eyes upward.

Basil glanced at his companion... *and felt his heart stop instantly.*

Sunny looked… **wrong**. More than wrong. *He almost looked kind of ill…*

*Basil’s friend was beet red, and there were tiny tears building in the corners of his eyes. Sunny’s eyebrows were knit. His mouth was held open slightly, but it was as if whatever*

*words he was trying to form would not leave him. Basil's friend visibly struggled but said nothing.*

*Basil locked eyes with Sunny, and felt himself freeze up in terror.*

Basil froze because he knew Sunny didn't make faces like that. Sunny *couldn't* make faces like that.

*Sunny's arms visibly shook. He was breathing heavily. His mouth kept making desperate little movements, but nothing actually came out of those weak attempts.*

Basil could say nothing. His friend looked as if he was about to fall apart all over again.

Basil stared in shock until a sudden change came over his friend. Sunny's eyebrows finally began to relax… *but then his expression turned serious just as quickly.* His mouth subsequently closed, whatever thought the boy carried having seemingly retreated back into his head. His lips pressed together almost imperceptibly.

*Sunny's breath steadied. Basil thought he might try to speak again after a moment, but he did not. The silence persisted as Basil's friend simply stared at him… with sad eyes. He had such sad eyes.*

*Sad and… and…*

"Ah… *uh…*"

*Basil made mouth sounds like an idiot. Sunny didn't react at all. Basil tried to tell his arm to pull away from Sunny's hand, but it somehow stayed within his gentle grasp as if by personal choice.*

*The dizzying feeling in Basil's skull started to fade into a dull, fuzzy static. The rain outside seemed almost imperceptible, now.*

*Sunny's determined stare dug sharply into Basil, but the blonde couldn't resist it anymore. He just let it continue, now too scared to look away. After a few more moments, it almost didn't feel entirely awful…*

*Kind of nice, really.*

Sunny was moving closer now.

...

*Sunny was moving closer.*

“N-No…W-wait...” Basil’s mouth finally managed to spit out a functioning phrase. The blonde’s eyes widened.

*Sunny stopped drifting closer.*

“Do you mean it?”

*Basil’s friend suddenly spoke. His voice was steady and determined. Basil heart throbbed in response.*

*The hand around Basil’s arm tightened just slightly.*

“If you tell me to stop, I’ll stop.” Sunny clarified. “Is that what you want?”

*Sunny’s expression held a powerful certainty. It quietly loomed over his friend as if challenging him.*

*Basil suddenly started trembling even faster. The gardener attempted to mouth the word “Yes” but he immediately started panicking all over again. Panicking heavily. Basil felt an incredible surge of fear rise within him.*

“Basil.”

*Basil felt the entire universe closing in around him. Every molecule in his body was spinning in the wrong direction. Every breath he took was short and labored. His heartbeat became frighteningly uneven.* ***He was dying****.*

“It’s okay.” Sunny quietly reassured him. "We're both okay, right?"

...

*Basil couldn't bring himself say anything, so the hall returned to silence once again. The rain outside only seemed to grow more intense as time went on, but the blonde no longer cared. In this moment, the future didn't mean anything to him.*

*Basil's heartbeat slowly began to come down again. Sunny refused to remove his hand from the other boy's arm. The pair simply sat in silence together, hidden in the dark corner of a confusing place. Basil and his friend both took a moment to catch their breath while the world around them wept.*

"Back at the hospital, when I was in your room..." Sunny began to speak again.

*Basil turned his head to look at him.*

"... after I told them the truth, but before you woke up..."

...

"... I considered trying to go up to the roof of the building."

...

"Why?" Basil questioned.

"..."

"Oh."

...

"I thought for a moment that maybe things would work out better for everyone if I was just... *gone."*

*Basil understood that feeling better than anyone.*

"So you were just going to leave... right after everything?" He questioned.

"Yeah." Sunny admitted.

"Why didn't you?"

"I thought it would have been too selfish of me to run away right then... *even though I had considered that you might not want to see me again."*

*The eyepatch on Sunny's face seemed to cast a little black shadow over his mourning expression.*

"But I really wanted to see you." Sunny admitted. "More than anything."

Basil smirked slightly.

Sunny took notice, and his own mouth lifted slightly in return. *"Why are you smiling?"*

"I'm just... realizing how stupid I am." Basil admitted.

*Sunny frowned.*

"Not like that... I just mean..." Basil struggled.

"..."

"I really did think you hated me. I thought that you were only talking to me back at the hospital because you needed... *closure, I guess.* I thought that you just felt bad for me after everything that had happened." Basil continued.

"..."

"For a while... every time you walked out of my room I'd think to myself, *'That was it! That's the last time I'm ever going to see him again!'"* Basil smiled once more.

"... Only for you to be back in my room again an hour later." He finished.

"But you still thought I hated you?" Sunny questioned.

"Yeah."

...

"After we woke up here, and we got stuck alone together, I thought that maybe you just hadn't realized it yet?"

"Realized what?"

...

"That I'm... **me**?"

*"Basil..."* Sunny grumbled.

"I'm sorry."

"So even after I told you I missed you, you really thought I was just… *lying?"* Sunny asked.

"N-Not exactly..." Basil mumbled.

"I thought that if I hung around long enough that you would eventually realize that you actually did hate me. I thought that maybe we had both just gotten too... messed up. And that if we spent long enough together we would... become normal, I guess." Basil tried to make sense of himself.

"And 'normal' meant that I would hate you?" Sunny inquired.

...

"Yeah."

*The hallway passed back into silence. Sunny picked up the can of soda which they had both left untouched. He lifted the drink to his mouth again and seemingly finished it off, briefly pausing to rotate it back and forth in his hands for a moment after it had finally been emptied. Sunny inspected the empty can.*

*Then, to Basil's surprise, Sunny drew his arm back slightly. After another brief pause, Sunny threw the empty can across the room. Basil watched the metal projectile arc through the air. It loudly bounced and clattered down the statue staircase before finally disappearing into the walkway below.*

Basil flinched at the sudden noise... *but then felt a strange sensation pass over the back of his neck.*

*Something about Sunny throwing the can down the stairs felt kind of... **wrong**. And yet the sound it made was distinctly relaxing to Basil, for a reason he couldn't quite explain to himself. Sunny lowered his arm and exhaled for a moment.*

...

"The rain is really loud." Sunny noted.

"Yeah."

"I wish there was something to do in here." Sunny thought aloud. "But I think I'm too tired to focus on anything."

"You didn't get any sleep?"

"No." Sunny denied. "I was too worried to fall asleep."

"Worried nobody would come today?" Basil asked.

"Worried that we weren't friends anymore." Sunny clarified.

*Basil smirked to himself but tried to hide it from his friend. Sunny was too cute.*

"Hey, Sunny?"

"Yeah?"

"For now... let's just try to rest again, okay?"

...

"Okay."

# Her Final Trip Pt. 7

Chapter Notes

Once again I am posting even though my schedule specifically underlines **no posting**.

...

I hope the Omori manga ends up being good.

"**Aubrey**! Wake up!"

*Aubrey groans in frustration. Her eyes open just enough to glare at the fuzzy image of an overenthusiastic Kel as he continued obnoxiously prodding her in the arm. Aubrey's desperate attempt to obtain proper rest was needlessly thwarted by her friend's selfish excitement.*

"Get the hell off me..." Aubrey growls and shuts her eyes again, rotating her body further away from the unwanted orange invader.

*"Snow!"*

"You're always so loud..." Aubrey grumbled.

"Seriously Aubrey, wake up! You gotta see this-"

Aubrey feels her half-sleeping mind wail with anguish. *Why was he doing this right now? How was he acting like he somehow got so much more sleep than she did?*

And what the hell did he just say? *Snow?*

Aubrey opens her eyes a little wider this time, but she turns her body towards the window so she doesn't have to look at Kel and Kel's idiotic drooling face.

Aubrey angrily stares out the window, hoping that if she ignores her friend's presence that he will leave her alone more quickly. She stares at the tree-studded cliff-faces around them and checks for any signs of civilization or Kel's supposed...

***Snow?***

Aubrey pushes a handful of pink hairs out of her face and blinks her eyes again. To her disbelief, the wild grass and dull vegetation surrounding them was noticeably flecked with the occasional melting pile of what seemed to be none other than ice and snow. Tiny patches of summer snow. *Snowmer.*

“Are you seeing this?” Kel enthusiastically reasserted his amazement. *“ARE YOU??”*

“Alright Kel, I think she gets it.” Hero laughed and tried to dull his brother's compulsive enjoyment.

Aubrey blinked again and rubbed her eyes, but the world around her remained unchanged. It really was a little bit white out there... *if only just barely.*

“When was the last time you saw snow in the middle of August, Hero?” Kel challenged his brother.

"Definitely... *never."* Hero admitted. "I mean, year-round snow is what they advertise out here, but I would have thought we'd need to be a lot..."

*Aubrey continued gawking as Hero spoke, feeling almost offended at the sight of the frozen water surrounding her for some inexplicable reason.*

" ... higher up, first." Hero mumbled.

*The dialogue in the vehicle died out for a moment as the three of them entered an old stone tunnel in the side of the cliff facing the vehicle.*

*Aubrey lightly scratched at her arm bandage as she gingerly rolled down the window. The air which immediately blew inside was cool and damp. She stuck her head out halfway and watched as the light from the other side of the tunnel grew closer. Kel appeared to do the same from up front.*

*The sound of the vehicle rolling across the wet asphalt became sharper and more accented as everything around them gained a slight echo from the surrounding tunnel.*

*For some reason, that gentle echo felt particularly dramatic to Aubrey. It almost seemed as though the dull, reverberant hum of this stone passage was forming a slow build-up to some previously-unforeseen crescendo. Aubrey couldn't help but feel herself get lost in the moment... a feeling which had become pitifully rare for her the past few years.*

*Finally, the shadowy passageway came to an end. The crescendo came to a close, but the world Aubrey saw wasn't all that different on the opposite side. The damp, shadowy green*

*landscape around them remained largely unchanged, save for one notable aspect.*

**The scale.**

“Woah.” Kel muttered. “Cool mountains.”

Hero laughed again from the driver's seat. “I guess we're getting close?”

Aubrey gazed out at an oncoming collection of buildings and roadways quickly growing closer as they peeked out at her from the trees. Several towering skyscrapers weaved in and out of the mountainous landscape as if attempting to form an enormous pattern that was too large for her eyes to fully identify.

*Faraway suddenly felt farther away than it ever had before.*

---

"So what now?" Aubrey asked, kicking a clump of ice that sat on the asphalt before her.

Hero let go of the gas pump in his hands. He stretched his arms behind his head and let out a nervous smile. "I guess we could go poke around town for a while?” Grab lunch?"

"What do mountain people even eat?" Kel thought aloud.

"Normal food, Kel.” Hero clarified.

Aubrey continued gazing at the inexplicably-frozen cityscape which now surrounded her. It felt like planet earth had suddenly pressed fast-forward on the seasons. She still couldn't get over how much colder it had gotten just over the last few hours, or how there only seemed to be more and more ice on the ground the closer they drew to the mountains which now surrounded them from every angle.

*But as majestic as the views were, they were far from pristine. Aubrey noted that the landscape was (upon closer inspection) not as 'wild' as it had originally appeared to be. The towering trees obscured much of it, but no matter where you looked there were buildings*

*baked into the sides of the cliffs and dotting the tops of every hill. She initially thought they might have been businesses, but upon further inspection Aubrey came to realize that most of them were likely just enormous houses. Million-dollar mansions peppering the cold woods as if every inch of it had already been squared-off and sold with invisible border lines running everywhere.*

*Aubrey sighed.* Oh well. Maybe entitled tourists like her would need to push even further northwards to find any of the truly-uninhabited boreal forests which she had seen on television. It was still nice out here.

*More than nice, really.* The view around them was outright incredible. But despite the genuine sense of amazement which the natural world so effortlessly elicited within her, it was still somewhat difficult for Aubrey to accept that any of it was really... *real.*

It all still felt kind of fake, like the three of them were creating a poorly-enacted home video. Sure, they were finally out here, but there wasn't really any good reason to be on this trip in the first place.

...

Aubrey stared out at the billowing grey sky which had swallowed this slice of the earth whole. She silently pondered how Mari would have felt about their trip so far, if she was tagging along with them. Aubrey could picture the satisfied smile on Mari's face with no effort at all... *a smile that would only grow wider as she quickly stole Basil's camera to take a few brief photos for herself.*

...

The pink-haired girl removed her phone from her pocket and took a photograph of the landscape which sprawled before her. Once the three of them were back home, Aubrey would rub this gorgeous view in Kim’s face.

"So you guys feeling burgers again or what?" Kel asked, face glued to the window like an overexcited child as he took in the sights.

"How about we eat some real food this time?" Hero suggested, smirking.

"Burgers are real." Kel underlined.

"I meant how about we skip the fast food and sit down somewhere..." Hero explained. “Sound good, Aubrey?”

“Sure."

---

Hero parked Polly's car in an empty lot downtown and suggested that the three of them walk around for a bit to see if anything caught their eye. They were on a vacation, after all.

And so Aubrey now walked alongside her old friends, trying not to let her jaw drop as the three of them slowly passed underneath the shadow of one of the largest buildings she had ever seen in her life.

Hero continued wearing a nervous smile on his face as they steadily paraded about the city streets. Kel kicked tiny chunks of ice into the road while the three of them walked past clothing stores and coffee shops. Aubrey held her hand out in front of her face to block the reflection of the sun as it bounced off a huge skyscraper standing on the street adjacent to her and her friends. The beam of light blinded her for a brief moment, but it died out quickly as the clouded sky continued rolling onwards.

Aubrey and her friends passed more than enough restaurants and bars and cafes to have already made an informed decision, but none of them had spoken up about anything. Aubrey wondered if the brothers were feeling a similar level of culture shock to her, or if she was the only one who felt completely out of place here.

*Kel probably never felt stuff like that. Hero might have, but Aubrey didn't know anything about where he was going to school now. Maybe he was already used to parading around elaborate cityscapes with his new friends. Unlike her and Kel, Hero had already become a real adult.*

...

*Aubrey shivered slightly. She wished she’d brought a thicker jacket.*

The three of them ended up in a small downtown park with large water features but notably few trees. Someone had planted several rows of pink and white flowers which ran along the walkway, but they all appeared to be either wilted or dead. Aubrey glanced at the deceased plants as they passed. Maybe the sudden ice and snow had killed them.

Aubrey watched as someone's Labrador broke out of its leash and began to charge at children due to what she assumed must have been an overactive fit of canine excitement. Hero laughed as Kel chased the fuzzy black beast down and restrained it for the benefit of an

extremely-apologetic couple. The situation was thereby promptly resolved by Kel's undeniably-impressive speed. Aubrey smirked with quiet amusement as she watched Hero's brother avert a minor disaster.

The trio sat down on a park bench as Kel tried to knock a few clumps of mud off of his shoes.

"I feel like we got off-track from what we were doing." Hero smiled and stretched his legs.

"I think I got paralyzed by all the choices on our way here." Aubrey admitted.

"I'm starving." Kel underlined.

"How about we just walk into the next place we come across and see how it goes?" Hero suggested.

*So that's what they did.* They made their swift exit from the opposite end of the park and promptly walked into the first available eatery on the other side.

They waited to be seated for about five minutes before finally being invited inside. Looking around, Aubrey suddenly became very self-conscious of the way she and her friends were dressed. This place was more than a bit more upscale on the inside than it had initially appeared.

The trio was seated. Hero nervously smirked and quickly propped open a menu after receiving a somewhat strange look from the waiter at the door. His eyes bulged for a brief moment. He quietly closed the menu again with a cough.

"I think this place is a bit out of my price range."

Aubrey closed her own menu with a shudder. "Same."

"So what do we say?" Kel laughed.

"I think its best we just slip out before we end up wasting their time." Hero guiltily smirked again and promptly stood from his chair.

Their first attempt having failed miserably due to economic oversight, Aubrey and her friends swiftly relocated to a considerably more modest-looking cafe a few blocks down.

Luckily, the number of zeros trailing after each listed menu item was far less egregious here. Aubrey still couldn't help but feel like a single sandwich shouldn't have been so expensive, but if settling for this meant they wouldn't have to spend another half-hour mindlessly wandering the city streets then it was probably worth it.

*Huh.* Maybe that was how they got you.

Kel flipped through a stack of brochures that he had seemingly looted from the waiting area at the front of the building. Aubrey's friend smirked as he quickly skimmed from one to another, treating them more like playing cards than reading material.

Bored of simply sitting and waiting for their food to arrive, Aubrey stole a member of Kel's newfound brochure collection while he wasn't looking. She skimmed through it herself. The cover was flashy, but it mostly just seemed like an advertisement for some of the natural wonders which were present in the area. The ad attempted to sell the reader on a variety of mountain trails, camping opportunities, rocky springs...

It almost seemed to go on forever, especially for such a small brochure. Aubrey had to wonder what kind of person even had the time to try all this stuff.

*"Heheh..."*

Aubrey tilted her brow as she heard Kel suddenly let out a quiet chuckle from the other side of the table. Hero also lifted his head in response.

"What's so funny, bro?" he asked.

To Aubrey's surprise, Kel didn't immediately respond. The younger boy just continued staring at the pamphlet in his hands with an intense expression on his face.

For a moment, Aubrey actually began to think that something serious was suddenly going on with him, but that suspense died out quickly when she took note of the subject matter Hero's brother was reading. *Regional wildlife.*

Kel finally opened his mouth.

*Aubrey braced herself. This was about to be something really stupid.*

"Do you guys think I could win in a fight against a moose if I was fast enough?" Kel asked.

"No."

Kel's brother laughed. "Depends on what you're armed with, Kel." Hero joked.

"How about like... a samurai sword?" Kel pondered aloud.

"Hmm… *no.* Sorry, bro." Hero scratched his chin. "Aubrey's right on this one. I think it would just run you over."

"What if I could dodge it, though?" Kel asserted.

"I think that's what the antlers are for, Kel." Hero smirked. "To prevent dodging."

"What if it ran into me at like the perfect angle?" Kel stared at the image of the moose with an absurdly serious expression on his face. "Like so I could slice it in the neck right as it trampled my head?"

Hero laughed again. "Well what's the point, then? You'd still be dead, wouldn't you?"

Kel grinned at his hooved illustration. "Yeah, but the moose would regret messing with me."

Aubrey rubbed her face. "At least Kel understands his priorities."

"Did you find anything actually useful in any of these or are you just daydreaming about getting killed by wildlife?" Aubrey sarcastically mocked Kel as she stole yet another brochure from under his arms.

"Not really." Kel denied, skipping over to his next advertisement. "You guys want to go skydiving?"

"No."

*Hero nervously smirked as he took note of a weird look his brother suddenly received from one of the passing waitresses. History appeared to be repeating itself.*

"I really don't think you should have just grabbed all of those, Kel…" Hero quietly spoke across the table, the corner of his mouth twitching a bit.

"What do you mean? That's what they put them there for, right?" Kel smiled inattentively.

"But you took *all* of them..." Hero sighed.

Aubrey shook her head. "Sorry, Hero. For once I have to agree with Kel. They're for taking."

"See?" Kel argued.

*Hero sighed again.*

"They're free, bro." Kel reassured him before scooting a fishing pamphlet across the table. "I got one here, just for you. *Join us."*

Hero seemingly gave in to his brother's coercion and began thumbing through the questionable reading material which he had so graciously been gifted.

"We spent all this time getting out here and we don't even know for sure what we're going to be doing..." Aubrey restated the obvious problem at hand as she skimmed through yet another brochure of minor interest.

"Hmm." Kel hummed, pondering to himself. "I think a lot of this stuff might also be a bit out of our price range."

"That's a housing brochure, Kel." Hero smirked. "We're not out here to buy a house."

"Hey, you never know." Kel argued. "What the heck is a *gatted* community?"

*"Gated."* Aubrey corrected him. "It means they don't want people like us ruining their hundred-thousand-dollar cliffside gazebos with our presence."

"Well... something like that." Hero summarized.

"So its like, *closed-off?"* Kel scratched his chin. "I doubt something like that could keep Aubrey out."

"Excuse me?"

"Remember all those times we had to be on the lookout while you jumped over that old wooden fence around your backyard?"

Aubrey rolled her eyes. *She did remember.* "I ripped my favorite skirt like four times while we were sneaking out."

Kel somberly shook his head. "Sometimes sacrifices have to be made for the perfect escape."

"Shut up."

Hero chuckled for a moment before the table swiftly grew quiet again.

*Everyone already knew why. It was impossible to talk about the past without also talking about* ***them***.

Those childish escapades weren't carried out solely with Kel's assistance. Although they'd as of now been left unmentioned, Aubrey undeniably received support from Sunny and Basil during her desperate flights from residential confinement.

Aubrey sighed internally. The table remained silent, but the topic at hand still felt at least a little less taboo than it had been before. Hero continued smiling to himself... *although the expression he wore was a bit sad.* Kel appeared to quietly thumb through his advertisements out of respect.

*Aubrey considered trying to continue their brief conversation about better days, but the waitress returned to their table before she could come up with anything worth discussing. Maybe that was for the best.*

The young woman asked for their orders while smiling with amusement at Kel's ridiculous table spread. She asked if Hero's brother had a big day planned, to which he comically grinned in response.

"So do you guys always get snow in August?" Hero asked their waitress, seemingly half-joking.

"**Hell no**!" She laughed before eyeing the three of them up again. "You guys tourists, then?"

"Yup!" Kel confirmed with a smile.

"I can't imagine what it's like to be traveling around here with how crazy the weather has been." The waitress pondered aloud, visibly tapping her chin with the pen she'd used to jot down their orders.

"So a late cold front like this is just as unusual as it looks?" Hero inquired.

The waitress overenthusiastically nodded. "I've lived here my entire life and I've NEVER seen anything like this. Almost makes you feel like the world is ending, doesn't it?"

Hero smiled. "I suppose it does."

"If you guys just showed up today then you missed the worst of it..." The waitress summarized.

"Really?" Kel asked.

"**Yes**! For like two whole days it started to look like December came early." The waitress laughed again. "For a minute I started to think I was going to have to shovel my driveway in the middle of-"

Hero continued casually chatting with the waitress while Aubrey quietly poked around in her drink, only half-listening to the polite dialogue their driver had slipped himself into. Aubrey really hadn't gotten enough sleep last night. Not enough to socialize, anyway. She was barely managing to even hold a dialogue with her old friends, let alone any overexcited waitresses.

After talking for a bit longer than Aubrey personally felt was professional, the waitress finally walked away and resumed taking orders from other customers. Aubrey and her friends started flipping through Kel's brochure catalog as they had been doing before.

"How special is that?" Kel spoke aloud, pausing to comment on the waitress's previous statement. "We just happen to come out here during their super-rare snow event."

"So how about that sledding now, Aubrey?" Hero winked.

*Aubrey laughed and scoffed at the same time. Kel lightly pounded his fists on the table.*

Hero's face quickly turned a bit more somber again as he removed the piece of paper that he'd been repeatedly pulling out of his pocket since their trip began. "I still have this list of things that Mari wanted to do with us, but I'm not sure how many of them we'll actually be able to get into without having made any prior reservations..."

Aubrey let out a sad smile. "We'll do as much as we can manage, Hero."

Hero smiled again. His face took on a bit of color.

Kel grinned. "I'll drink to that."

"But does anyone else get that feeling like they're forgetting something?" Hero's brother asked, suddenly scratching his chin.

Aubrey thought for a moment but didn't come up with anything. Hero lifted his eyebrows in confusion.

"Uhh... you mean like calling mom back?" Hero guessed.

"Nah, I was gonna let you handle that."

"Thanks, Kel…"

---

Once it had been (repeatedly) established that Kel was NOT about to remember whatever he was forgetting any time soon, the trio's lunch concluded rather quickly. More quickly than Aubrey had expected, anyway.

Maybe they were all a bit starved, or maybe they were all just eager to resume their improvised vacation. Regardless, Aubrey and her friends finished eating sooner rather than

later. After some brief arguing over the bill, (which Hero repeatedly insisted on covering by himself) the three of them were back on the streets once more.

*Or at least they would have been, but Kel had run back into the building at the last second in need of the restroom. Aubrey and Hero waited for him by the curb.*

The pink-haired girl felt herself smirking slightly as she and Hero watched countless cars run across the damp roads of the busy cityscape which surrounded them. Aubrey spoke.

"I think that waitress liked you, Hero."

"Heh. *Oh yeah?"* Hero scratched the back of his head.

"Run back in there and grab her number." Aubrey joked.

"We don't even live anywhere close to here..."

*Aubrey smirked in response... but also sighed a bit on the inside. Even if they were back home, Hero definitely still would have refused to do something like that.*

...

Aubrey stared off into the distance and combed through her hair with her fingers. She silently wondered if it was even possible to help Hero right now, especially when she could so barely help herself.

Aubrey had told herself that her and Kel were only on this bizarre trip to support Hero, but that hardly seemed to be true anymore. Aubrey hadn't really 'supported' anyone. She'd barely done anything at all. The longer their excursion went on, the more pointless and self-indulgent that idea became.

But in spite of that fact, Aubrey could no longer deny that she had been wrong about going on this trip. After their shared night together in the motel, she felt something inside her begin to shift... *if only a little.*

It was as if Aubrey was more in-motion now than she had been for longer than she could remember. She just needed to find the will to keep that feeling going.

Aubrey felt a tiny flicker of determination slowly building inside of her. Even if she didn't yet know what it might be, Aubrey was sure that, in the end... *there was going to be a point to all of this.*

*There had to be.*

Kel finally walked out the front door with a contented sigh after having returned from the bathroom.

"You guys should try the bathroom in there." He recommended. "It makes the one at Gino's feel like a prison cell."

...

*Aubrey lightly stomped on Kel's foot.*

"Ow! *Hey!* What was that for??"

# Her Final Trip Pt. 8

“Sorry sir, but it's all closed. Out of season weather makes it too dangerous.”

“Oh.” Hero replied. “So even though there’s snow everywhere, nobody can go up to the top?”

The woman let out an apologetic smile. “Yes sir, that is correct.”

“Although the top of the mountain is usually open year-round, the current weather conditions make it inaccessible. All active gondolas have shut down due to excessively-turbulent winds.”

“I understand.” Hero nodded. “That’s too bad.”

“Hoping to go skiing?” The woman asked.

“No ma’am, just sledding, actually.” Hero admitted. “I don’t even know how to ski.”

*The woman scratched at the side of her face for a moment.*

“I’ll let you in on a secret, sir.” She stated.

“Yeah?” Hero tilted his head forward a bit.

“If sledding is all you want, then there’s empty slopes all over the place around here. You can buy old tubes cheap at the visitor center.”

*Hero nodded along as she continued.*

“There was just enough snow recently that you can still get away with sledding pretty much anywhere you want. So of that’s what you’re looking for, I’d get in on it quick before everything finally melts.”

“Ah.. I see.” Hero thought aloud. “Thanks for letting us know.”

“So do you still want to buy a pass, sir?”

“Yes, please.” He confirmed.

*Hero paid the modest entry fee. The woman turned around and gave him a piece of paper. He pulled the car forward.*

“So we actually genuinely **are** going sledding, then.” Aubrey almost laughed.

“Well, it was on Mari’s list.” Hero nervously smirked.

“**HECK YEAAAAAH**!!” Kel stuck his head out the passenger’s-side window as the three of them drove further into the trees.

---

"I'm beginning to have second thoughts about this." Hero muttered.

"It's too late bro!" Kel laughed. "We're already up here."

"I didn't realize how steep it was going to be." Kel’s brother swallowed nervously. “Are you sure we shouldn’t go look for someplace else?”

“HELL no.” Aubrey complained, throwing the cheap hand pump back into the car. “I am NOT helping blow this stupid thing up again.”

“**YOU** wanted to go sledding, **YOU** drove us up here.” Aubrey put her foot down and into the front of the tube. “Get the hell in, Hero.”

“You heard her, bro!!!!” Kel laughed. *“Get in!!”*

Hero nervously stepped into the last available position in their newly-acquired family-sized tube. He shuffled his legs around so that both him and his brother could sit in relative comfort.

“You know, if we crash there isn’t anyone else out here to hel-“

*Kel began violently shaking his body back and forth, trying to get the change in friction to topple the tube forward.*

*Hero stared down the massive empty hillside ahead of them and leaned backwards.*

Hero’s stomach churned. The change in elevation might not have been anything dangerous on foot, but he had doubts regarding whether an old raft like this could actually-

*The inflatable sled finally toppled forward, and the trio started gaining momentum quickly. Only a few seconds managed to pass before Hero's vision was assaulted by a blur of pink hairs.*

Kel leaned to the side in an attempt to evade Aubrey's unruly locks. Hero's brother laughed maniacally.

Hero pushed himself further backwards in an attempt to both counteract the incoming gravitational forces and escape the onslaught of Aubrey's hair. His body steadied slightly. He managed to stop feeling like he was in immediate danger of being flung from the sled.

Hero turned his head and watched as the snowspeckled world around them whizzed by. For but a moment, everything had become an indistinguishable smear of green and white.

*Hero felt a slight rise in his chest. There was a tiny humming sensation emanating from somewhere behind his ears.*

…

*The cold wind whizzed through Hero's hair. He could just barely hear Aubrey laughing up front through the sound of his brother's screams.*

…

*Even if everything else on this trip ended up a pointless waste of time, or an empty vanity project…*

*…this one moment would still be perfect.*

Or at least it would have been, except for the fact that the downward slope was becoming noticeably **bumpier** the further the trio descended.

Hero had thought that their raft would have stalled by now, but the initial momentum it gained during their drop was so powerful that the sled had continued traveling unabated even as the change in elevation had largely dwindled away. They were still moving.

The minor bumps beneath them quickly started to become something more akin to a constant, angry vibration.

To make matters worse, something about their snowbound transportation medium was also growing a bit… *lopsided.*

*The tube was losing air.*

Hero leaned to the side opposite Kel and tried to make out where in the distance they were actually going to end up coming to a stop. As he did, he came to realize that the empty field that hemmed-in the bottom of the slope was no longer white. The snow at the bottom had already melted.

*Uh oh.*

*Hero's blood ran cold.* Charging a slowly-decomposing sled directly onto a muddy field filled with sticks and gravel seemed like a significant safety hazard, to say the least.

Luckily for Hero, it actually didn't matter… *because him and his friends weren't making it to the bottom of the slope either way.*

**The sled's slight drift had increased, and their dying raft was now on an obvious collision course with a dense cluster of evergreens.**

“Oh sh- **BAIL!!** ***BAIL BAIL BAIL!!!”*** Kel yelled over the wind, subsequently hurtling himself from the sled like a human bowling pin as he continued laughing.

*Aubrey shrieked and followed shortly thereafter. Hero watched her body slide a few feet further down the slope before stopping facedown in the snow.*

*Hero snapped himself from his sudden panic and also pushed away from the sled in a desperate bid to escape.*

…

*Or at least he would have, but the sled had already deflated significantly. The tube’s PVC lining had begun to grip Hero's right foot as it slowly lost air and folded in around him.*

*Uh oh*.

*Hero tried to lessen his momentum by digging his left arm into the remaining snow, but by then it was already too late. The oncoming trees quickly turned from small green specks into looming wooded towers.*

**Oh, shit**.

---

"**HEROOOOO**!!"

*Hero opened his eyes and spat a pine needle out of his mouth. He was alive.*

Hero sat up. He checked himself for injuries, but he actually felt completely fine.

The largely-deflated sledding tube had gotten caught on the surrounding vegetation before finally hitting the trees themselves, so its total momentum ended up decreasing significantly before impact. Hero managed to dodge the majority of branches by staying low to the ground.

*Hero heard footsteps running up behind him.*

"**Hero**?? Are you okay??" Aubrey called out from somewhere beyond the trees.

"Yeah!" Hero confirmed, letting out a laugh. "I'm fine."

Hero removed himself from the underbrush and rejoined his friends.

"Holy shit that was awesome! *Ahaha!!"* Kel beamed.

"No it wasn't!!" Aubrey protested. "Hero could have gotten really hurt!"

"That's what he gets for failing to do the bailing." Kel clicked his tongue disapprovingly.

Aubrey growled. *"You are just **so-**"*

"My foot got stuck." Hero admitted, laughing again. "I kind of got dragged along at the end there."

"Ouch!" Kel shook his head. "Sorry, bro."

"But you're okay?" Aubrey asked.

"Yeah, there's barely a scratch on me." Hero confirmed again.

Kel slapped his brother on the back. "Sorry Hero, I tried to slow down the sled… but after Aubrey popped a hole in the front there wasn't really much-"

*"What??"* Aubrey protested.

"What do you mean WHAT?" Kel stopped. "YOU popped the tube."

“**No I didn’t**??!" Aubrey protested again. "How can you blame that on me??”

“If you lean down too much at the front of the tube it scrapes the ground harder-“ Kel argued.

“I didn’t have a choice!! You were pushing me off with your stupid legs!”

*“Don’t drag my legs into this!”*

“You dragged your legs across my **FACE**!!”

Hero brushed a small branch off of his shoulder. He watched with amusement as Kel and Aubrey’s verbal disagreement slowly escalated into shared acts of physical violence. Vague insults slowly turned into tangible snowballs.

The pair began chasing each other in circles. Kel screamed as Aubrey nailed him in the back of the head again.

**Ouch**. Hero smirked. They were all clearly underdressed for this kind of weather. Kel’s brother shuddered as he kicked the snow off of his feet.

Hero began to wonder if he needed to get involved in his friend’s dispute, but he eventually realized they were both laughing.

A faint smile lingered on Aubrey’s face... *even if it was a rather sadistic one.*

*Hero laughed once more.*

---

“So who won?” Hero looked over his friends as they both laid in the snow, exhausted.

*“I did.”* Kel huffed.

“Shut the hell up.” Aubrey exhaled.

The pink-haired girl suddenly shot back up to her feet. “RRGH!! **God**!! It’s SO cold!!”

She shook the snow out of her hair and dusted it off her shoulders. Kel slowly sat back up again.

Hero felt something land on his head.

*Maybe that’s why it was so cold.*

“Hey guys, look.” Kel remarked.

*Hero almost couldn’t believe his eyes, but it had begun snowing again. Tiny snowflakes were just barely descending from the skies, peppering the ground around them.*

*The clouds overhead had darkened slightly, and the light of the sun had become increasingly dim. The immediate environment looked as if it had been wrapped under a thick blanket, but that blanket provided no warmth.*

*Aubrey peered down at the remains of their cheap tube which now hung lopsided in the trees.*

“So what do we do now?” She asked.

Hero gazed up the enormous hillside which they had just descended.

“I guess we walk back up.”

Aubrey sighed.

*Hero scratched the back of his head and began descending towards the flattened patch of land that the three of them had been rapidly approaching moments ago. There wasn’t really any reason to continue going downwards, but the trip further down was much shorter than the trip back up and Hero was in no rush to begin.*

*His friends began descending alongside him. Hero noted that everyone had suddenly fallen a bit quiet.*

*Hero considered their surroundings. Something about seeing such a bizarre snowstorm was kind of enchanting, in a way. He watched as another wave of hesitant snowflakes slowly floated down onto them from the heavens.*

*The trio finally reached the bottom of the slope and pushed through another small grove of trees. On the other side, the world had been left pristine. The further the three of them travelled from the road, the more inexplicably wild everything became.*

*Hero finally stopped walking as the trees died down again. Him and his friends were left overlooking an enormous rocky plain.*

*Every inch of it was decorated with large stones that must have slowly descended from the mountains above over countless centuries, but the trees had left this space unpopulated. Hero gazed out at the barren landscape and struggled to come to terms with the scale of it all.*

…

*The world always seemed quieter when it snowed.*

…

"I wish she was here to see this with us." Aubrey remarked.

"Yeah." Hero agreed.

"I wish they all were." Kel stated.

...

*"Yeah."* Hero agreed again.

…

"Hey, Aubrey?” Kel spoke.

"Hm?"

"You said you went to that church for a long time, right?" Kel asked.

"Yeah?"

"So do you believe that there's something out there... *looking out for us?"*

...

"I don't know." Aubrey admitted. "But I tried to." She scratched at her arm.

*Hero's brother stared out at the vast landscape before him, before suddenly winding his arm backwards. Kel threw the final snowball he'd made as far into the distance as he could. Hero couldn't make out where it landed, exactly.*

"Oh universe, or god, or whatever... please let me see my friends again someday." Kel requested.

…

*The universe or god or whatever did not respond.*

…

"Or I'll like... have to chase you down, I guess." Kel clarified his threat.

Hero chuckled. "Well said, Kel.”

"Yeah." Aubrey smirked.

...

*Hero and his friends stared out into a vast emptiness.*

# The Truth

*Polly poked her head out the back door of her employer's residence in search of a young blonde who was mysteriously absent from the rest of the house. She had just finished running her errands and had intended to speak with him before she started making dinner.*

Surely enough, Basil was in the garden.

*Or overlooking it, at the very least.* He was perched atop an enormous grey pot which had been flipped upside down. The large pot had been utilized as a improvised chair for the past month as it was the one container left that had yet remained empty over the spring planting season.

*Polly gently approached her client from behind before speaking.*

"Basil?"

*"**Eah**!"* The herbal prince jumped from atop his throne, immediately dropping an object that he must have been holding a moment prior.

"Sorry!" Polly spoke quickly. "I didn't mean to sneak up on you…"

"That- It's-" Basil struggled to respond as he quickly flailed his hands all over the grass beneath him, seemingly desperate to recover whatever it was he dropped before Polly could see. He palmed a small, rounded object and slid it into his left pocket before finally regaining the composure he needed.

Polly had no idea what it was that he was trying so desperately to hide, having only gotten a brief glance at it... *but judging from the quick peek she had stolen, it honestly just looked like a rock.*

"I didn't- you really s-scared me, haha!" Basil smiled awkwardly and faked a laugh, clearly very uncomfortable with Polly's sudden reappearance. The caretaker felt a surge of disappointment at how her simple presence still clearly agitated him, but she tried not to dwell on that fact. It was perfectly natural. Nobody liked being snuck up on after all, especially nervous teenagers like Basil...

"Are you alright?" She inquired.

“Y-Yeah! Just, you know… *gardening.”* Basil picked up the empty watering can that was lying beside him as if equipping it somehow accentuated his previous point.

“Sorry to bother you.” Polly spoke. “I was just in town and they had a big sale on watermelon… I was wondering if I could get your help cutting a couple of them before your grandmother wakes up.”

“Oh, sure!” Basil agreed. “T-That’s no problem…”

Polly didn’t really like asking much of Basil (as he always seemed to be rather lost in his own personal struggles) but if asked to do something for her he would almost invariably agree to it. No matter what she asked him to help with, Basil would always nod along and politely join her with the task at hand.

*It was a bit of a backhanded trick, but Polly could temporarily ensnare Basil using such a method. Moments like these were her chance to speak to him directly.*

“What was it that you were looking at before I interrupted you?” Polly quietly inquired, incapable of preventing the question from exiting her mouth. "Something for your garden?"

*Polly did not desire to make Basil any more uncomfortable than he already was, but she felt as if it would be even more awkward if she just pretended she hadn’t noticed his obvious attempt to hide whatever it was he was holding.*

“Oh, n-not really- it's just uh… a rock.” Basil stated, removing the object from his pocket but admittedly obscuring part of it with his grasp. *Polly could see enough, though. It really was just a rock.*

“So it is.” She replied.

---

Basil followed Polly back inside. The two of them stood at the kitchen table and worked to slowly dice up two small watermelons into edible chunks. Basil seemed relatively proficient with a knife, but he hesitated dramatically with every subsequent motion he took, making his overall dicing efficiency rather poor. Polly would've tried to help him out a bit, but the cutting of the melon was hardly a real concern either way.

The caretaker took a moment to consider what she was going to say next, and how she was going to phrase it. The room had fallen rather quiet, save for the soft sound of blades slicing gently through the soft flesh of fruit.

...

“Basil.” Polly spoke quietly to the boy standing across from her.

“Yes?” He replied.

“Your grandmother might have to undergo another operation soon.”

Basil nodded slowly. “Yeah. She told me.”

Polly nodded back. “Luckily, it’s very unlikely to have any complications. Its a completely routine procedure.”

“That’s good!” Basil expressed. He tried to sound enthusiastic but his voice was flat. A few moments between the two of them were once again wasted in relative silence.

...

“Does your grandmother like watermelon?” Polly asked.

Basil cut another chunk of melon in half. “Uh... I think so! Most people like watermelon, don’t they? Haha…”

“Do you?” Polly inquired.

“Yeah. We used to… *I like it.”* Basil mumbled, seemingly correcting himself.

...

“That’s good. I might have bought a bit too many… but it was so cheap!” Polly smirked and defended herself.

The melon-slicing continued. Polly let a pile of her freshly-cut cubes slide off the cutting board and into a large bowl.

…

“Basil?”

“Y-Yes?”

“How are you doing, recently?”

The boy’s gentle smile faltered. His soft blue eyes reflected only a somber sense of hopelessness back at Polly. A quiet, hollow acceptance of the peaceful emptiness that now surrounded them both. Basil's face displayed a forced acceptance of the unacceptable... *an expression that had become all too common in this house.*

*The question was a stupid one. Polly knew that well, but she still wanted to give him an opportunity to speak openly about what lived inside his mind during dreadful moments like these. It was an opportunity that she felt should always be offered, even if she knew Basil would never take it. No matter how many times it was presented to him, this boy would inevitably close up again.*

*Basil’s problems were internal. Polly could do nothing to help solve them from the outside. No amount of kind words, gentle gestures, or shared misery would ever change anything for him.*

*Still, Polly would no longer hesitate her offers. She couldn’t stand doing so anymore.*

Maybe Polly couldn’t help him. Maybe Basil really was further than she could ever hope to reach… *but only he could decide that.* Whether the door between them was to one day open or simply stay closed forever was up to his own personal discretion.

“I’m alright.” Basil stated.

*This boy was a miserable liar.*

“Are you sure you don’t want to talk about anything?”

Basil shook his head. His soft blonde locks swayed gently across his face as he slowly cut into the fruit beneath him.

“It’s nothing, really.”

---

***She feels the room rotate slightly. Everything is shifting from side-to-side***.

*Polly puts a hand over her stomach. Her insides twist violently. She feels sick. There's nothing physically wrong with her, but she is still overtaken by a wave of inescapable illness.*

*The curse which she has just been given is something which can never be taken away. Everything was different now, and that fact was unchangeable. Every second of every minute of every hour which she had spent in that house was transformed and conglomerated into an unbelievable horror which would now inhabit her skull for the rest of her life.*

*Everything she had ever said to that boy was recontextualized in but one moment. Every sad smile or quiet sob had been abruptly turned from a momentary tragedy into an unthinkable nightmare.*

*Basil wasn't just sad or lonely, he was traumatized. He hadn't simply been left behind by his parents, but by the very world he occupied. Basil's hidden tragedy was the result of a desperate mistake enacted by his own two hands.*

*It was no wonder why he always acted so afraid. It was no wonder why he always seemed so trapped within himself.*

*Basil didn't shut her out because he felt there was something wrong with him. Basil shut her out because he had something to* ***hide****.*

***Basil had always looked so, so guilty. As if every miserable part of the entire world was somehow his fault****.*

Polly was going to throw up.

*He did that? He thought of that?* ***Basil****?*

"Is that the truth?" Polly demanded.

The black-haired woman nodded slowly.

*How old would Basil have been? Thirteen? Twelve? God…*

*Ugh…* ***fuck****!!*

*Why? Why was your son fighting his sister to begin with?*
*Did Basil walk in on it after the fact? Did he see it happen?*
*How do you know it was his idea? Did your son tell you? Did Basil?*
*How would he even know how to do that? Why would he?*

The woman shook her head. “Please, stop… I’m sorry… *please…”* She begged.

Polly stopped talking. The insides of her head were spinning in circles, and that feeling left her unsure which of those questions had left her lips at all. She was having a bit of trouble even registering the conversation anymore.

Polly tried to ignore the fact that the hotel room felt as though it steadily continued to rotate. She attempted to get a hold of herself for a moment before all the cold realizations rushed back to her head once more.

*She had gotten the truth she wanted. The answer which her curiosity had pushed her towards for so long was finally unveiled before Polly, to sickening effect.*

**Dead. He was dead.** For just a moment, Polly became sure of it. Those two really had left Faraway to die. They'd left to escape from something which she could scarcely even imagine.

That’s the reason he had smiled so much, back then. While he and his friend were covered in bandages, **Basil was smiling**.

*Now Polly finally understood why.*

“How many people know?” The caretaker inquired, feeling out of breath.

“Only me and my ex-husband.”

*“No one else?* You never told anyone else this?”

“No.” She repeated.

Polly was immediately taken aback. “No one in Basil’s family?”

The other woman’s mouth trembled. She shook her head and clutched at her sides.

*“No.”* She repeated again.

*Polly felt a cold sensation pass down her neck.*

"…"

"Unless those boys told someone themselves, then I'm the only one in Faraway who knows." Ms. Suzuki reiterated.

*Then why did you tell me?* Polly thought to herself, but she was too afraid to let the question pass her lips. Maybe the older woman just couldn't take holding such a secret anymore… *at a time like this.*

"I had always wondered if he told his grandmother, or his parents..." Sunny's mother mumbled. "But I suppose that no longer matters anymore."

Polly shrunk back for a moment. She kept trying to recuperate from everything she had just been told, but the spinning feeling in her skull still refused to abate for a single second.

*Even if Polly were to accept that this woman really hadn't told anyone else the truth about her son during the years which had passed since the loss of her daughter, something about what Sunny's mother had said still did not add up. Another nauseating question started to steadily take form in Polly's mind.*

"When I arrived… it seemed as if you were expecting someone else." Polly stated. "Looking for someone else."

*The other woman said nothing.*

"Is that… not true?" Polly insisted.

The other woman hesitated.

…

"I thought you might have been my ex-husband." She admitted.

"Are you expecting him right now?"

The woman shook her head. *"No."* Her lip trembled once more. "I just t-thought… *I wanted…"*

Ms. Suzuki sobbed and placed her face into her hands.

Polly felt an immense weight of guilt pressing down on her shoulders. This woman was not in a condition to be talking about any of these things, especially with a stranger. It was no wonder she was so desperate to see someone familiar. No one should ever be left alone at a time like this.

The fact that the boy's father was absent even during his own son's vanishment was horrifying to Polly, but she still considered what the situation must have looked like from their perspective. *How would you ever move on from your child being taken from you in such a way? How would you raise your son while knowing what they had done?*

Polly was snapped back out of her thoughts when Ms. Suzuki started talking again. This time, she spoke of her own accord.

*"It isn't fair."* She whispered, sobbing slightly. *"I did everything I was supposed to..."*

Polly felt another slow wave of fear pass over her. Sunny's mother began to speak with her hands still planted over her face. Her voice was marred by a crushing sorrow.

**"I forgave him! I forgave my son! I forgave Basil, too!"**

**"I was kind to him! I always was!! I treated him as if he were my own!!"**

**"I never told a single soul! I never hated them for it!!"**

**"I smiled through all of it!!! Every second I was alone with him I did my best!! I DID EVERYTHING I COULD!!"**

***"I NEVER MEANT THE THINGS I SAID!! OF COURSE I DIDN'T!!! IT ISN'T FAIR TO PUNISH ME FOR THAT!!!"***

**"SO WHY?? WHY IS MY SON GONE??** ***TELL ME!!"***

Ms. Suzuki stood up and grabbed Polly by the shoulders, grappling her as she screamed. Polly froze for a moment, but the broken woman shrunk away immediately upon recognizing

the horrified look on the caretaker's face. Sunny's mother hunched over on the floor as she continued weeping.

***"I didn't mean it... I didn't..."***

Polly took a moment to recuperate herself... *and then bent down to place her hand on the woman's shoulder.* She tried to console her slightly, if such a thing was possible. Ms. Suzuki only continued to sob.

Polly felt a lump growing in her throat as she listened to the other woman cry. The two of them were similar, in a way. They had both been left behind by the people who they were supposed to care for.

Now they both have no choice but to acknowledge how empty their struggles had been. In the end, no matter how much Polly wished otherwise, there was nothing she could have done that would have 'cured' Basil of the harrowing pain which took root inside his head.

Polly stared down at the woman who wept at her feet, and felt a slight tinge of disdain. *Was it really right of this woman to have kept their secret? If such a guilt had been eating her son and Basil alive, wouldn't it have been a mercy to just spare them from it? Was there some reason that she couldn't?*

Polly reevaluated herself. *What were they supposed to do now? Just sit in the darkness and hope for good news? Isn't that all Polly had been doing this entire time?*

*Why did she even care so much? Polly had lost clients before. She'd always been fine before. What was she doing digging her fingers into other people's business like this?*

*Ah... coming here was a horrible mistake. Polly had involved herself in all of this far more than what was appropriate. She had supplanted herself into something far worse than she could have possibly imagined.*

And yet, despite her constant overreach, she could not simply walk away now. For however long she had left in Faraway, Polly still had a job to do. Doing that job started with getting the hell out of this accursed place.

"Ma'am... why are you staying in a hotel at a time like this?" Polly asked, not wanting to sound rude but baffled nonetheless.

*The other woman finally raised her head slightly, but she only continued to stare at the floor.*

"Don't you have any family you could stay with right now?" Polly reiterated.

Sunny's mother shook her head. "No. None of my family is anywhere near this town."

"Your ex-husband?" Polly suggested.

"I have no clue where he lives anymore. He never truly tells me anything."

...

"Would you mind if I visited you again?" Polly inquired.

Ms. Suzuki shook her head. "Of course not."

Polly slowly nodded in response, thinking to herself. She stood up and began to silently make her way back out of the room.

"Thank you." The other woman spoke.

Polly turned to view her.

"*... And I'm sorry."* She finished.

Polly smiled and shook her head.

*The caretaker places her hand on the doorknob and hesitates. She feels as if she should turn around one more time and say something before she leaves, but she can't bring a single thought forward in her mind. Maybe there was no point in words at times like these. Maybe a hand on the shoulder of a stranger was the most one could hope to do.*

---

Polly steps back into the same hallway she had been chasing Sunny's mother down earlier. Unlike before, she now feels a hyper-awareness of the immediate environment around her. Her nerves had been shaken.

Polly stares down at the floor as she walks. The pattern on the carpet beneath her almost seemed hypnotizing.

Polly silently continues down the hall, turns the corner once more, and exits the same lobby which she had stepped into less than a half-hour earlier. She walks across the parking lot and stands on the sidewalk as the cars roll by.

*In this moment, Polly suddenly begins to feel more alone than she had ever felt in her entire life.*

She pulls a cellphone out of her purse and considers dialing her parents, but she realizes she wouldn't know what to say to them even if they picked up. There was no real reason to be calling, after all.

Polly silently tabs through a list of old friends, but she can't find a reason to phone any of them, either. Despite having known some of the names which lingered in her contacts for the majority of her life, all of them somehow felt like complete strangers to Polly now.

Maybe it was too late to get back in touch with old friends, anyway. Maybe she had spent too much of her time absorbed in her work, and had ultimately ended up neglecting everyone else.

*Polly began slowly walking down the sidewalk, although she didn't have any idea where it was she thought she was headed.*

Polly watched the cars drive by. Her mind remained blank.

Polly made a call. She didn't even consciously realize she had done so until the dial tone began to hum in her ear.

"-I can't believe you two never finished-"

"Wait... Polly, I think its already going-"

"Haha! Quick, Basil! Say something!"

*"Me?"*

"Yeah, you!"

"Uhh.. l-leave a message after the-"

***Beep***.

Polly smiled sadly.

*The three of them had all agreed they needed to fix it later. None of them ever did.*

# Don't Forget

Chapter Notes

Thanks for reading.

*Basil struggles against himself.*

*The blonde has once again managed to recognize that he's dreaming, but he already senses that his fleeting flicker of awareness has begun to fade. The vivid dreamscape which surrounded him was painted with a striking level of detail, but that weight and texture just wasn't enough to hold his exhausted sense of self in place.*

*The strangest thing about Basil's dream was its setting. He's in a hospital bed. The bed beneath him felt impossibly real, but the environment itself was disturbingly mundane for such a vivid hallucination.*

*Yet despite how uninspiring his current dream appeared to be, Basil nevertheless feels an incredible surge of desperation.*

*It was as if a tiny needle on a string was dangling just over the top of his head.*

*This dream was excruciatingly familiar. He'd been having so many familiar dreams, recently... but they had all been repeatedly blurring together and disappearing from his grasp.*

***He couldn't let that keep happening**. He needed to remember this time.*

Basil rotated his body so he could gaze out the window stationed above him. There were clouds flying overhead, and the quiet booming of thunder steadily growing closer and closer from somewhere off in the distance. Basil could almost feel the air around him shake as he laid alone in his hospital bed.

The blonde ran his fingers across the massive cut in his stomach, slowly inspecting himself. He could touch it without too much pain, now... but the new skin was still soft and swollen against his stitches.

Basil couldn't remember the last time he'd looked at his wound, but he knew that he'd been avoiding it. Basil felt as though he was a wilted leaf that had been haphazardly stapled back together.

Ow.... it hurts...

*Basil suddenly withdrew his hand from his stomach in an attempt to shake himself from his thoughts. He once again tried to refocus himself on the illusory nature of his current surroundings.*

*Basil grit his teeth. He kept getting pulled back into his own mind. The pain in his stomach felt entirely real, and that scared him. The last thing he needed was to start unwittingly feeling up his own cut while stuck in a lucid dream. For all he knew, he might actually be picking at the real thing while he slept.*

***Basil struggled to stay lucid. He needed to remember this. He needed to remember this but he couldn't remember why.***

...

Basil checked on his cut one last time.

*It was just a dream, wasn't it?*

...

His cut looked gross.

...

It was strange... *how something as dramatic as an attempt to end your own life could end up as nothing more than a big red scab.*

...

This previously life-threatening injury he carried was slowly becoming less and less meaningful with each passing day. Basil wasn't going to be torn in half much longer.

But in Basil's mind, that meant only one thing. These quiet hospital days which he had been sharing with his friend were swiftly due to end. He would finally have to give the farewell speech which he had been slowly writing within himself. In the end, Basil's dreaded goodbye would likely be forced out of him sooner rather than later.

**Basil hates himself**. He despises the pitiful feeling that aches through his chest, because he knows its origins are ugly and self-centered.

Yet in spite of that fact, Basil also knows he would have gladly kept enjoying this temporary escape had the universe continued offering it to him. After all these years, he still never knew when to let go... *even when he knew he had to.*

The wound which he now gently caressed with his fingers was proof that he had both tried and failed. He wanted to let it all go, but he also desperately wanted to drag Sunny along with him.

*Back then, in that final, anguished moment... Basil had been so sure that things would've been better for his friend that way.*

He had thought that Sunny was the same as he was. He had thought that Sunny was just as desperate, just as far-gone, and just as hopeless.

*But that wasn't the case.* Basil might have needed Sunny to save him, but Sunny didn't need Basil at all.

But it had been nice to believe otherwise, for a brief moment. *Even though that moment had almost killed them both.*

...

*The blonde dug his nails into the cut just slightly, only enough to draw the burning sensation back to the surface.*

It was soft and pink and ached with a terrible pain. A pain dulled only by the substances which they'd been feeding into him.

*But Basil wanted to feel that pain*. This wound was what he had earned. It was the physical proof of his obsessive greed and desperation. A mark which could never be removed. This divide he had made would likely be with him for the rest of his life.

*However long that ended up being.*

…

Polly had asked him if he was really okay spending nights alone like this, but Basil assured her that he was. In fact, he preferred it this way. For the first time in years, that perpetual loneliness which lingered within him was once again being gently drowned out by an old friend. Slowly smothered.

Just knowing that Sunny shared this building with him... that they each rested only meters apart... *that was enough.* It was more than Basil believed he would ever have again.

...

*It was wrong to enjoy this so much. Basil knew that, but he still couldn't bring himself-*

**Suddenly, Basil is shaken from his thoughts**. The blonde's door was being opened.

Basil feels a sudden surge of fear as he peers into the darkness, but that fear dies out much more quickly than it did last time. Basil knew who it had to be before he could even make out the other boy's form in the shadows. The gardener tried to compose himself as he watched Sunny slowly shut the door behind him.

***Sunny was back again***. *Basil's mind ceaselessly buzzed with newfound speculations on his friend's intentions. Nothing had come out of Sunny's last midnight visit, so Basil had assumed that there would never be another.*

*And yet, there he was.*

*Sunny noticed Basil looking and silently waved his hand as he approached. The other boy felt his face heating up.*

"Did you p-pick the lock?" Basil joked.

"I guess maybe they forgot to lock it?" Sunny guessed.

"Haha... the nurses don't seem to care about that rule as m-much as the doctors do..." *The blonde nervously smirked, silently hoping that no one was at risk of losing their job over this prohibited meeting.*

*Basil watched as Sunny scratched the back of his arm. Basil's friend seemed somewhat hesitant about whatever it was he wanted to say.*

*That hesitation made Basil feel a bit nervous, but the blonde tried not to show it. He didn't want to make Sunny feel awkward, even if this impromptu bedside visit somehow felt even stranger than the last one.*

"Hey... *Sunny?"* Basil spoke. "Why didn't you just use the, uh..."

*Basil gently gestured to his half of the two-way radio which the nurses had provided them as a gentle compromise to Sunny's repeated refusal to stay in his own room.*

And yet Sunny still hesitated to respond. Basil was beginning to feel very anxious now.

"Aren't you t-tired of getting in so much trouble just to see me? Haha." The blonde nervously faked a laugh.

*Sunny shook his head. Basil tried to ignore the sudden aching in his chest.*

After a few more moments spent silently playing with his hands, Sunny finally spoke.

"We're... not going to be here much longer, are we?" Sunny asked. Basil's one-eyed companion stared at the floor with a miserable frown on his face.

*Basil felt his entire body deflate. The other boy had just spoken his thoughts aloud. The aching in Basil's chest instantly grew worse, even though he couldn't deny to himself that there was something strangely nice about knowing that Sunny was also... **upset**.*

...

*Basil shouldn't have been happy about that.*

"No." Basil agreed. "You'll probably be out of here before I am. Haha…"

*Sunny suddenly looked even more downcast. Basil tried not to enjoy the look on his face.*

"Are you... tired of being at the hospital, yet?" Sunny inquired.

***No**. He never would be. Basil would've happily lived here in this room for another four years at least.*

"Yeah." Basil lied. "I'm getting sick of lying in this bed all the time..."

*The blonde trailed off, watching his friend look downward once again.*

Sunny seemed to take a breath. He was steeling himself for something. Basil's mind suddenly took pause. Sunny's friend could recognize that he was about to say something important.

"Do..."

...

"Do you want to get out of here with me?"

...

*Basil's heart skipped a beat.*

"What do you mean, Sunny?"

"Just for tonight." He clarified.

"..."

"Because we don't know how much longer we have left."

"You... want to get out of the hospital?" Basil inquired.

"Yeah."

...

"They'll just catch us sneaking out." Basil stated.

*Sunny seemed to think for a moment. He let out a tiny sigh.*

"You're probably right." Sunny admitted.

"So why even bother, then?" Basil asked.

"You don't want to?"

*Basil didn't say that.*

"..."

"If they catch us, they'll just drag us back here." Sunny claimed. "What do we even have to lose at this point?"

"I don't want you to get in trouble..." Basil mumbled.

"I've already gotten in trouble a bunch of times." Sunny smirked.

*Basil's chest hurt.* ***Stop smirking****...*

"That's..." Basil trailed off.

"I can't really walk all that well without help." Sunny admitted.

"All the more reason not to go anywhere." Basil countered.

*"All the more reason you should come with me."* Sunny countered back.

*Basil's face heated up again. Geez...*

"I can't go by myself." Sunny stated again. "I need you to come with me."

*Don't... don't say it like that. Anything but that.*

Basil lifted the edge of his blanket and pulled it over the bottom half of his face, trying to hide the smile that was insistently forcing its way onto his lips. The blonde wouldn't let Sunny see it. He couldn't.

"Where w-would we even go, Sunny?" Basil mumbled into his fabric.

"We could..." Sunny trailed off. His cheeks appeared to darken slightly as he seemingly tried and failed to come up with anything at all.

*Basil tried not to laugh at the fact that Sunny clearly hadn't thought any of this idea through.*

Sunny frowned even harder than he did before.

*Quit being cute.*

Basil knew he could put his foot down and just tell his friend that there was no way the two of them were leaving. It was that easy. He could demand that Sunny stop trying to come up with crazy ideas while still injured. *Injured from all the damage which Basil had inflicted on him.*

Basil could just clear his throat and say **No.**

But listening as Sunny tried his hardest to convince Basil to try and escape with him was far too... *too...*

**He just really wants to go somewhere alone with you**.

That wasn't true. That was just... *hehe...*

Basil tried to ignore the growing butterflies in his stomach so he could finally swallow the smile that kept trying to assert itself onto his face with incredible persistence.

"We could... go to the park." Sunny muttered, sheepish.

"T-The park?" Basil requested confirmation, the irrepressible inclination of a laugh hinting in the corner of his voice. Basil's amused lilt rose effortlessly through the blanket he continued attempting to hide behind.

*"Don't laugh..."* Sunny childishly grumbled under his breath. Sunny's reaction only made the humor even harder to swallow. Even with his entire mouth covered, it probably couldn't be any more obvious that Basil was laughing now. *Ahh... haha...*

"I'm sorry." The blonde snickered again. "I couldn't help it." Basil defended himself.

*He really couldn't.* Basil just wasn't used to seeing this kind of behavior from Sunny. Sunny wasn't really the type who would suggest his friends go somewhere or do something with him. That was everyone else's job. Sunny had always been more of a silent tagalong. He'd quietly follow behind everyone else with some dull mixture of polite curiosity and mild indifference.

Sunny was rarely interested in dragging anyone with him by force.

"Just shut up and come with me already..."

*And that was why his current insistence was all the more intoxicating.*

**He's hurt because of you. You shouldn't even be humoring this right now. You're disgusting.**

*But even Basil's endless fountain of self-loathing could not bring him down right now. He was floating too high in the skies to be brought back down to earth.*

Sunny folded his arms on Basil's bed and laid his head down in-between them as he skulked with a soft scowl on his face.

Basil finally withdrew his face from behind its shield, as it had become readily apparent that hiding his amusement was no longer an option. Incapable of restraining the impulse, Basil let himself laugh slightly as he sat up further. The blonde leaned towards his friend. He reached out and touched Sunny on the arm without really thinking about it beforehand.

*He couldn't help it.* Basil didn't want his friend to feel like he should be embarrassed about anything.

But Basil embarrassed himself a little, though. He couldn't remember the last time he had reached out to touch another person without asking, and he quickly retracted his hand once he took note of the sudden mistake.

Basil hoped Sunny hadn't really noticed. The blonde finally finished snickering and moved backwards again as Sunny lifted his head once more.

"Don't you want to do something fun together before one of us has to leave?" Sunny argued. *"At least once?"*

*Haha... the two of them were already doing something fun...*

"So your idea of fun is going to the park the middle of the night?" Basil requested confirmation.

"We were never allowed to go when we were kids." Sunny argued.

"Haven't you heard the thunder outside? We'd just get rained on." Basil objected.

"I don't have a problem with that."

"You aren't supposed to get bandages wet, Sunny. That's dangerous."

"It's not even raining yet."

"But it's probably going to start raining soon-"

"Which is why we should head **out** while we still have a head **start**." Sunny cut him off.

Basil laughed again. "We'd be soaked before we even get there."

"You don't know that." Sunny objected. "Besides, it really isn't that far."

"Further than you think." Basil smiled. "And that's all assuming we could even sneak out in the first place."

"I mean, look how many times I've been able to sneak into your room." Sunny argued.

"I don't think that's the same thing, Sunny."

"Oh Yeah? Who's the one sneaking here, you or me?"

"Haha..."

*Sunny suddenly frowned again, his growing agitation seemingly a bit more genuine than he was letting on.*

"What would I have to say in order to get you to leave this room with me?"

*The blonde tried to ignore the growing heat in his face.* "Why are you being so insistent about this?" He asked.

Basil laughed one last time, but it died down quickly as he took note of Sunny's surprisingly serious demeanor.

Basil's friend had suddenly grown very quiet.

"Is... something wrong?" The blonde asked.

...

*"I'll answer that if you come with me."*

"Now that's just..." Basil trailed off as he watched Sunny reach a hand out towards him, insistently gesturing that he take it.

*Basil's heartbeat stopped for a brief moment. The smile on his face faded away, while the burning in his cheeks doubled instantly.*

***Sunny was serious**.*

"Please." Basil's friend begged him.

"But..." The blonde protested.

*Sunny stared at him.*

...

"F-Fine..." Basil muttered under his breath, hesitantly grasping Sunny's extended hand. It was warm.

Sunny forcibly pulled Basil upward as he stood, attempting to help the other boy up but visibly wobbling as he did so. Basil's friend continued staring him dead in the face. The gardener was starting to feel extremely exposed.

*Sunny suddenly let go of Basil's hand. He hesitantly scratched at the side of his neck.*

"Stay here for one second." The younger boy requested, turning away as if to exit the room.

"Gather your stuff." He demanded, glancing back at Basil before quietly opening the door and sliding back into the hall.

Basil flexed the fingers on his now-empty hand and tried to reorganize himself. He slid a few of his belongings into a bag which Polly had left for him, but wasn't really sure why. He absentmindedly placed his photo album inside and zipped it up while helplessly trying to guess at why Sunny was so desperate to get his friend to escape the hospital with him. Basil's cheerful levity from a few minutes prior had been quickly replaced by a sudden surge of anxious embarrassment. *How did he even end up agreeing to any of this?*

*Basil flinched as the thunder boomed overhead once more. The sound was steadily growing louder. He turned to the window to see if he could spot any stray flashes of lightning, but nearly jumped out of his own skin when the door suddenly opened again. Sunny stepped back inside.*

"Y-You scared me!!" Basil nervously laughed. *"That was fast..."*

Sunny was carrying a backpack this time, but he visibly teetered on his feet as he re-entered Basil's room. Basil had serious doubts that Sunny was even going to be able to make it down the stairwell with such an obvious tilt.

"Did you get everything you need?" Sunny asked him.

"I mean, I g-guess..." Basil stated. "Do we really need all-"

"Let's go, then." Sunny held out his hand once more, and Basil hesitantly took it again. Sunny immediately turned with Basil in tow and pushed the door back open, poking his head into the hall for a moment before dragging the gardener along with him. Basil felt like he really should have been objecting far more to all of this, but as soon as they stepped into the hall he knew it was too late to try and back out.

The hallway lights on Basil's floor were often very dark by this time of night, but there was still more than enough light for the pair to at least be able to see where where they were headed. Sunny stumbled very slightly as he walked, but he still moved with surprising confidence as he gently pulled Basil towards the stairwell doorway.

Sunny hesitated for quite a while before trying to take the first step downward, but Basil's friend seemingly managed to get into the rhythm of it after a few carefully-composed motions. Basil wanted to tell him to be careful, but the blonde was growing far too scared to raise his voice at all now that the two of them were right in the middle of their escape.

Basil began to move a bit ahead of Sunny as they walked, if only so it would be easier for the blonde to catch his friend if Sunny ended up slipping. Sunny gripped the guardrail with one hand and Basil's with the other, moving downwards a lot quicker than the gardener had anticipated. Soon enough, the two of them were rushing downwards at a fairly brisk pace. Basil's heartbeat pounded loudly in his chest.

The two of them silently peered around the corner of the stairwell's bottom and into one of the halls on the ground floor. The lights for this floor were all on, and they were painfully bright. If Basil focused, he was sure he could hear the voices of nurses on the night shift, coming and going to and from wherever it was that their work demanded of them.

***Basil suddenly began to feel even more afraid than he already was**. This wasn't going to work. This entire thing was such a stupid idea. They should both just turn back before-*

Sunny stepped out into the hall first, walking silently. Basil had no choice but to follow alongside him. The nurses talking in the distance didn't sound particularly close, but considering how long some of the hallways were, they likely wouldn't have had to get very close at all to still take notice of Basil and his friend's active attempt to sneak out of medical confinement.

Sunny stumbled quickly before turning a corner away from the main lobby of the building. Basil guessed he was either assuming a back exit must exist somewhere, or simply trying to cover further ground without moving towards any of the locations within the hospital which were still clearly active.

Paranoid, the two of them began creeping much faster. They had no other choice, as they both became more and more exposed with every additional footstep placed between themselves and the darkened stairwell which they had left behind.

Stumbling on his own feet, Sunny tried to rush them through a back hall that looked as though it might have been leading to an administrative area of the building. With baited breath, they both pushed through a door that was labelled as 'staff only'... *and that was when Basil saw it.*

*At the end of this final hall, there was a door that led outside. Basil knew it. He wasn't exactly sure how he knew, but he could feel it welling up inside him with absolute certainty. Maybe it was the way the door handle was shaped, or the fact that one could just barely smell a hint of fresh air when they moved in this direction, but...*

***This was it**. They were actually going to break out of the hospital. Basil felt a sudden laugh try to bubble up inside him. What a ridiculously childish thing to get caught up-*

**Sunny violently dragged Basil into an empty room as the vague silhouette of a nurse suddenly appeared at the end of the hall ahead of them**.

Basil's heart almost exploded as the two of them plunged back into sudden darkness. Sunny slapped a hand over Basil's mouth as the two of them toppled to the floor.

Basil's friend pushed off of the ground and peered into the shadows which now surrounded them. Luckily, this room appeared to be empty.

*Basil felt a sudden wave of unimaginable panic.* ***Had they been spotted?*** *Did the person at the end of the hall notice them?*

Sunny slowly removed his hand from Basil's face and set a finger to his lips. Sunny's eye narrowed as the sound of a person talking steadily became audible alongside gentle footsteps.

*There were at least two people, and they were drawing closer. Sunny continued holding a finger to his lips as Basil trembled. They both slowly stood up.*

The voices in the hall grew incredibly loud, until suddenly lowering in volume again. Basil heard the sound of a door being opened and closed.

The voices had entered the adjacent room. They were still talking, but both of the hospital staff members were now out of the hall.

*Basil felt his blood freeze up. What if they opened their door, next? What if this was the room that they checked immediately after?*

Sunny silently poked Basil in the ribs. The blonde looked back at him once more.

Basil watched with confusion as his friend suddenly held out an empty palm as though he were waving. Sunny uniformly flexed all of the fingers on his hand a single time as if trying to draw emphasis or attention.

*Basil felt a chill run down his spine. It had been years since he'd last seen it, but the strange gesture Sunny gave was still instantaneously recognizable.*

*It was a simple trick. More specifically, it was a visual trick that Kel had come up with.*

*Sometimes, alongside him and Sunny, Basil would help Aubrey sneak out of her house or backyard so that she could come play with them.*

*During stealth missions like those (or various playground games in general) it often became necessary to find a means of communicating with one another over a distance, but in a way that did not require the use of spoken word.*

*As such, Kel had made the declaration that an empty palm and finger twitch was all that would be necessary to alert his friends to one of an escape artist's most important messages:*

***Run on five.***

Basil watched with terror as Sunny began slowly counting down with his fingers. *Four.*

*No, no no. He wasn't ready.*

*Three.*

*Basil shook his head. Sunny only nodded and continued to count downwards.*

*Two.*

*Basil tried to recompose himself as Sunny placed his empty hand back on the doorknob.*

*One.*

**Sunny lowered his final finger, and the two of them pushed through the door and began dashing down the hall as quietly as could be done while still charging ahead relentlessly.**

*They reached the door that Basil was sure led outside. Sunny stopped running for but a half-second, quickly checking behind them to see if anyone had spotted their hasty exit before finally forcing the door handle downwards and pushing his way through the final passage.*

**A rush of wind suddenly hit them.**

The breeze Basil felt in that first moment was surely one of the best sensations he had ever experienced in his life. The gardener had been trapped inside a stuffy hospital room for far too long. Although it was still a midsummer night, the air outside was surprisingly cool and crisp.

The sound of thunder boomed in the distance once more. Basil shuddered as the door closed behind them.

*Exhausted, he reflexively let out a breathless laugh.*

"Haha! *Hahaha!"* Basil gasped. "I can't believe that actually worked..." The blonde keeled over. His sudden laughter made the cut in his stomach burn with a dull pain... *but it was worth it.*

Sunny returned his laughter. The other boy tripped slightly as the two of them hurried their way across the asphalt behind the back of the hospital. Basil had to briefly stop his accomplice from stumbling by violently yanking Sunny's arm upward.

"Woah! Stay w-with me, Sunny! Hehe..."

"Thanks." Sunny replied, smiling again.

The two of them crept into the tiny patch of trees that hid behind the back of the hospital parking lot, pausing for a moment to catch their breath amongst the shadows.

*The blonde coughed slightly at the sudden odor. People always dumped so much garbage onto these little slivers of nature. Basil kicked an empty soda can away from his foot.*

"So do you even remember where to go from here?" Basil asked his companion.

"Uhh... I think so." Sunny gave a rather unconfident response.

"It's been a while since I've been out of my house..." Basil's friend admitted.

"We could follow the road back towards Othermart... but do you think it'll be too busy?" Basil pondered aloud. "What if someone notices us?"

"Even if someone did, who's going to bother us now?" Sunny argued. "We're just two normal teenagers out for a midnight walk."

*"Uh huh."* Basil sarcastically nodded along.

The gardener tried to pretend as if he was having a little less fun than he actually was. One of them had to be the voice of reason right now. *As reasonable as a situation like this could be, anyway.*

"We just need to not look suspicious." Sunny claimed.

"You have like five different bandages wrapped around your head."

"You're right... help me get rid of these?" Basil's friend joked.

"Sunny..."

*The pair continued creeping around the edge of the parking lot, fully-aware of their own idiocy but far too drunk on the sudden sense of freedom to care. Basil stretched his legs again. It felt really nice outside.*

Basil tried to hold his breath steady as Sunny adjusted his grip on the blonde's hand, shifting his thumb further down the other boy's palm.

*It felt **really** nice outside.*

The pair crept along the main roadways, but tried to do so outside of direct view of the traffic. They dropped down into adjacent drainage gulches and hid behind roadside foliage whenever possible.

But although Basil and his friend initially tried to remain stealthy, the further they got from the hospital the more confident they became. The pair slowly began creeping less and running more as their night on the town continued. Sunny began to raise his voice a bit. Basil nearly had a heart attack as the two of them frightened a stray cat which bolted out from between a pair of overturned garbage bins. His companion just laughed it off.

*Basil was having fun. A lot of fun. Fun he didn't deserve.*

...

But it was still nice, regardless of whether or not Basil deserved it. It was nice to pretend as if the future didn't exist, if only for a little while. Such was a frighteningly beautiful feeling to hold captive in your hands. Basil couldn't even remember the last time he had managed to capture such a pure experience.

*This might be the last time he ever did.*

"I think we're still going the right... *Basil?"* Sunny suddenly stopped.

"Yes?" Basil responded.

"Are you okay?"

Basil's brows lowered. "Huh? Why?"

*That was when Basil finally felt it dripping down his face. Empty little droplets were silently escaping him, now so frequent as to have become unnoticeable.*

*Ah. He was crying again. He'd been crying so much recently that he could barely even recognize it anymore.*

"I'm, um..." Basil rubbed his eyes on the back of his hand.

...

*"I'm s-sorry..."*

...

*Sunny watched silently as a sob left Basil's throat by force.*

"Do you want to go back?" Basil's friend gently inquired.

*The blonde rubbed his eyes again.*

"No." Basil confidently stated. "I don't."

"Okay." Sunny agreed.

Sunny and Basil continued their night out on the town, though a bittersweet sense of tragedy followed right alongside them. The looming thunder in the distance only grew louder, but Basil couldn't care less anymore.

A stormy summer wind blew through the shadowy boughs of the trees looming over them. It was in this moment that Basil suddenly realized he had forgotten how beautiful Faraway could become at night.

*Painfully beautiful. Beautiful and terrible and full of things which only drew forth awful memories of old horrors.*

The gardener repeatedly stole glances at the other boy's face, carefully inspecting the bandages his friend was wearing as if Sunny was somehow going to fall to pieces as soon as Basil looked away.

Basil suddenly felt intensely apologetic. He wanted to apologize even more now than he had already been doing for the past week. Basil wanted to break down all over again, but he already knew that Sunny wouldn't want to hear him saying 'sorry' anymore.

*Besides, Sunny was having fun right now, wasn't he? Basil didn't want to ruin it by being too... himself.*

Basil quietly wonders what is running through the other boy's mind in this moment. He wonders if Sunny would still want to hold hands with an old friend if he didn't simply need the physical support at a time like this.

Basil had to assume he wouldn't. They both probably looked really childish right now. Even if this was one of the last nights Sunny would spend in Faraway, Basil had to guess that being forced to hold hands like schoolchildren was still an embarrassing experience for his friend.

*But maybe getting caught doing something so innocuous should have been the least of Basil's worries right now.*

Basil feels a sigh try to build up inside him. *There it went again.* He was enjoying himself for a brief few moments, only for it to slip away once more. All it took was a single distraction. Even in these final days, Basil still couldn't escape from the person he had become no matter how much he wished to.

So Basil decided he just wouldn't pay attention to that person. The blonde reasserted his focus on Sunny as the other boy stumbled slightly across the sidewalk. Every time Sunny would slip, Basil would tense his arm such that his companion would be able to easily pull himself back together again.

Every time Sunny stumbled and needed to reassert his balance, Basil couldn't help but feel a sinister little droplet of self-satisfaction. There was something so intoxicating about knowing that Sunny needed Basil's help to stay on his feet right now... *even if it was Basil's fault his friend had ended up like this in the first place.*

Another wave of ugly self-criticisms tried to build up inside Basil's head, but this time it didn't even matter. The gardener momentarily found himself too distracted by his immediate environment to get lost in all the pointless loathing.

The curves and bridges and sidewalks around them had started to warp into a more familiar shape. It took Basil a second, but he slowly began to recognize where they were. They'd both be walking up on Fix-It any minute now.

Their stupid little trip would soon reach the arbitrary destination which Sunny had decided on, and the pair's midnight excursion would conclude almost as quickly as it had started.

*Basil steeled himself.* He knew Sunny might try to keep dragging them further if his friend allowed it, but Basil also knew that he would have to put his foot down this time. The booming thunder in the distance was only growing louder and more-insistent, with occasional flashes of lightning striking the skies with increasing frequency and intensity. It was going to start raining soon. Basil was rather surprised it hadn't started already.

*Neither of them should have been putting themselves at risk of getting soaked in the first place, but Basil knew that fact was doubly-true for Sunny. All the fun and games were over now.*

"Too bad Fix-It is closed." Sunny suddenly spoke.

"Why?" The blonde questioned.

"We could have snuck into the gardening section."

Basil laughed. "Thanks Sunny, but I'm n-not exactly in the mood to shop, anyway..."

Sunny rolled his eye. "I wasn't talking about for YOU, I meant for ME."

Basil raised his eyebrows. "When did you start being so interested in gardening?"

"Well, I have all these plants now, don't I?" Sunny asserted.

Basil smiled to himself. "Yeah, I guess that's true."

"I need all the appropriate gardening gear like you have at your house." Sunny thought aloud.

"Haha... y-you really don't need that much..." Basil reassured him.

"Will you teach me how to keep them alive? Like if I need help is it okay if I call you?"

*That's... That wasn't...*

"Sure, I guess..." Basil agreed. **Idiot**.

*Sunny smiled, and Basil's heart skipped a beat. He hated himself for it. Sunny kept talking for a moment, but Basil was too frustrated with himself to pay any real attention to his words.*

The pair quickly walked down the sidewalk past Othermart and Hobbeez. The park was now swiftly approaching them. Basil flinched as he felt a stray raindrop hit the back of his head, but despite his growing anticipation of the oncoming downpour, the raindrop which had struck him seemed to have come alone.

*Basil and his friend began moving a tiny bit faster. The blonde watched a pair of cars race by.*

Finally, their humble destination had been achieved.

Sunny and Basil reached the park, but they both continued standing awkwardly by the sidewalk instead of actually stepping into the grass. They both stood overlooking it all for some strange reason that neither seemed able to vocalize.

Basil pushed back his hair with his spare hand. Maybe Sunny was just as sad for this to end as he was.

...

*Wishful thinking.*

There was no sign of any napping homeless people, at least from what Basil could tell. The blonde silently hoped that meant they all had somewhere better to take shelter when the weather had become this inhospitable.

...

*Sunny still had not said anything.*

...

Basil felt a sudden surge of discomfort begin to build in his stomach. It didn't arise immediately, but the more Basil looked over the patch of grass ahead of them, the more ill he felt.

*This was where Sunny had found him. The wooded field ahead of them was where Sunny and Kel had fought with Aubrey back when her friends were still tormenting Basil. Back when they were fighting over the photo album that Basil couldn't keep safe.*

*This was where Aubrey had tried to take a swing at Sunny... only for Sunny to swiftly slice her open with a steak knife. Aubrey was lucky she had gotten away with such a shallow cut.*

**Basil felt a brief pang of fear. The discomfort in his stomach suddenly began to build**. *He'd been trying not to think too hard about it, but why would Sunny even feel the need to do something like that in the first place? Was it really necessary for him to have gone that far?*

Basil had been wondering about his friend's fight for some time, but it hadn't really felt possible for him to build up the courage to finally ask until just now.

...

*The look on Sunny's face was so... **dead**, afterward. Wearing such an expression, Basil barely even recognized him at first.*

*Basil's immediate thought was that Sunny looked as if he could easily slice him in half, too. Chop him into pieces and not even flinch afterward.*

The juxtaposition of Kel's enthusiastic smile beside Sunny's cold, unflinching stare was almost too much for Basil.

...

Sunny's arm twitched slightly. The unsettling memories that bounced around in Basil's head seemed to have infected his friend as well. The other boy had remained frozen in place.

Despite the park being right in front of them, Basil's black-haired companion was not moving an inch. Maybe Sunny was regretting this particular choice of venue.

"Sunny?" Basil spoke softly. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah..." Sunny confirmed, seemingly shaking himself off a bit.

*And yet despite Sunny's insistence that he was fine, the other boy still remained motionless, not taking a single step forward.*

Basil finally took a step onto the grass ahead of them while tugging lightly on Sunny's arm. The blonde simply tried to ignore all the terrified butterflies that were now flapping about inside his stomach.

"We should get away from the road." Basil stated, feeling the sudden headlight of an oncoming vehicle gaining on them from the distance.

*Sunny finally stepped onto the grass, and the two of them began to wordlessly drift forward.*

It all felt so bizarre to Basil, now. This empty, lonely place was where they had both spent such a large portion of their younger years. Thinking back on the memories they shared here used to cause Basil to feel a sense of inescapable dread... but having Sunny walking alongside him again made even those painful memories feel strangely soft.

It was a horrible, inescapable nightmare... *but it was a nightmare that had finally passed.*

The blonde exhaled. Maybe coming back here wasn't such a bad idea, after all. At the very least, the powerful fear inside of Basil slowly began to subside.

Until recently, Basil had never even considered that him and Sunny would ever reconcile enough to go reminiscing together like this. It still felt like some kind of illusion.

And yet here they were.

The blonde allowed himself to get a bit lost in the shared nostalgia. Basil even caught himself smiling for a moment... although that smile faded away quickly.

Basil was filled with a very distinct sense of sadness, but it was a type of sadness that he was glad to have been given the opportunity to feel at all.

*This is... such a beautiful send off, isn't it, Sunny?*

**Will you miss me?**

*With little effort, Basil could feel himself begin to remember the way Kel climbed the swings while they were still in-motion, or the way Aubrey laughed when he fell, or the way that Hero and Mari took shelter from the spring rain underneath the giant yellow cat which Sunny loved.*

*It was all nearly as vivid now as it had been all those years ago. This place really was special.*

"I wish... we could go back." Sunny suddenly spoke aloud, gently pulling Basil from his bittersweet memories.

"..."

*"I'd do anything to be able to go back."*

Basil wiped his eyes on his hand again. *"Yeah.* Me too."

"I have so many memories of this place that I can't even keep them straight anymore." The blonde admitted.

"Do you remember... dodging Kel's stray basketballs?" Sunny asked.

"Haha, yeah..." Basil confirmed. "Do you r-remember how many times you'd fall asleep by yourself and we'd have to come find you?"

*"No."* Sunny denied.

"Sure you don't." Basil smiled.

"Do you remember that time I sold lemonade here with Aubrey?" The blonde inquired.

Sunny smirked. "Yeah. You wore that... *yeah.*" The other boy stopped himself.

"Huh?" Basil stopped walking. *"Wore what?"*

"..."

"What were you going to say?" Basil prodded.

"You know, the uh... *pink thing."* Sunny clarified.

Basil felt a tinge of red sneak onto his face. "D-Did it look stupid?"

"No." Sunny denied. "I didn't say that."

"I b-bet I still have it, somewhere." Basil impulsively thought aloud, suddenly feeling a bit flustered by this change in topic. A certain unwanted memory immediately attempted to creep back up into his mind.

*A memory he'd revisited recently... in a dream he'd had...*

*D r e a m ?*

**Basil suddenly felt an overwhelming wave of panic. *Forgetting.* He was forgetting something important.**

**No. No no no. This was all wrong. All of this was- they weren't-**

"Hey, Bas-"

Sunny seemed as if he was about to say something else, but Basil's friend ended up tripping on a tree root instead. The sudden struggle to regain his footing swiftly silenced him. Basil wasn't sure if he was relieved or disappointed.

"Are you okay?" Basil asked, trying to help him back up.

"Yeah." Sunny confirmed.

...

*What was he just thinking about, again?*

...

*The blonde absentmindedly ran his fingers through his hair as if to subconsciously adjust his flower clip, but then he remembered that it wasn't there. Basil hadn't had it on a single time since the two of them had ended up in the hospital together. He... felt a bit strange without it.*

The cut on Basil's stomach continued throbbing. It had been a long time since he'd walked around this much.

Basil glanced at his companion. Sunny appeared to be growing increasingly annoyed by his apparent inability to see where he was going. Maybe it was finally time for the two of them to turn around. The blonde removed his spare hand from his hair.

"Do you want to go to the l-lake before we leave?" Basil inquired...

***And then froze****. Wait, why did he ask that? Why had he suggested that?*

Sunny seemed to momentarily pause in response. "Uh... sure. If you want to." He agreed, a hint of surprise clearly audible in his voice.

Basil swallowed as the two of them began drifting in the direction of their old hideout.

*Why did he say that? Basil didn't particularly want to go back there, himself. He'd almost drowned just a few days ago. The bad memories would surely outweigh the good ones by several orders of magnitude.*

*Basil could still taste the murky lake water as it attempted to flood into his mouth. He could still feel the weight of the liquid pushing down on his arms. It was like being wrapped in a blanket that he didn't know how to escape from. A terrible grasp which had enveloped him completely.*

*He had been terrified, back then... but...*

Basil was shaken out of his thoughts again by the feeling of Sunny suddenly releasing his grasp on the blonde's hand.

An immediate tinge of disappointment bounced into Basil's head, but the blonde forced it back down just as quickly. It wasn't as if he didn't know it was coming.

"S-Sorry." Sunny apologized. "My hand was getting a little uh, *sweaty."* Basil's friend rubbed his hand on the front of his shirt.

*Basil had already noticed. Not that it bothered him.*

"That's fine..." The blonde reassured him.

Basil let his hand cool off from the sudden detachment while the two of them continued creeping through the woods towards their lakeside picnic spot. Sunny had begun to compensate for his sudden loss in support by taking extremely small steps.

The other boy crouched slightly as he walked, staring down at the roots beneath them with unflinching precision. Sunny kicked at one of the discarded traffic cones as they passed, pushing it out of his way a bit.

*Basil tried not to look up as they continued. He didn't want to see the knotted branches lingering over their heads. The sound of them creaking in the wind was starting to frighten Basil terribly.*

The gardener redoubled his focus on just getting where they were going. Him and his friend had finally reached the clearing. Just the same as it always was.

Basil suddenly felt himself growing nauseous with embarrassment as he thought about all the screaming Sunny had seen him doing right here.

*Lots of screaming. Screaming and crying.*

The wind kept picking up. The trees that surrounded this place tried their hardest to protect Basil and his friend from the elements, but none of them could shield the pair entirely. A sudden smattering of leaves escaped from the forest and scattered over them, filling the shadows of the lake with waves of shed vegetation that drifted aimlessly across its surface.

It was almost kind of beautiful, but appreciating it was not at the forefront of Basil's list of things to do right now. The intense violence of the wind was scary. The two of them should have really called it quits a while ago.

Sunny flinched and picked a leaf off of his head. "So, uh... was there something you wanted to do out here?"

The blonde blinked. *Right. This was his idea.*

Basil scratched the side of his face. "N-Not really. I guess I just wanted to see this place one more time..."

"We don't have to take a nostalgic trip across the pier, do we?" Sunny nervously inquired, half-joking.

"No." Basil confirmed. "Let's not."

**Basil yelped slightly as an enormous crash of lightning immediately flashed over their heads**. The boom of thunder which followed closely behind was deafening. Basil had to admit there was a certain beauty, though... in seeing the swaying grass lit up so brightly like that... *if but for a moment.*

Sunny laughed. "That was **really** close."

"Yeah, it r-really was..." Basil awkwardly adjusted the strap over his shoulder.

*Basil felt his heartbeat start to lower once more... only for it to build back up again as he looked his friend in the face.*

...

"Sunny, I um..." Basil started, failing to speak correctly through his embarrassment. "Can I..."

"Yeah?" Sunny asked, suddenly seeming quite nervous in response to Basil's own visible discomfort.

"I..."

*Sunny stared at him.*

"I need to go to the b-bathroom really quick."

*"Oh.* Yeah, of course..." Sunny scratched his head.

"Can you turn around, please?" Basil requested.

"Yes."

Sunny awkwardly turned around in the general direction of Othermart. Basil crept past their old picnic spot and shuffled off into the woods, trying to ignore the repeated rushing of the wind blasting into his ears.

The blonde pushed the hair out of his face again as he walked away. Basil had begun to feel as if there was something about their current excursion that his friend was keeping private. Sunny seemed as though he was refraining from telling Basil something, but the gardener had no idea what that could actually be.

...

Maybe it was best not to know. If Sunny was keeping it from him, then Basil's companion was probably hiding it for a good reason.

Their continued dishonesty was simply to be expected. It wasn't as if Basil hadn't been keeping secrets. The blonde placed a hand over his stomach and winced as he continued creeping forward.

But maybe none of that really mattered, in the end. Sunny said he wanted to have one last night of fun, and that is exactly what the two of them had done.

It was fun while it lasted, anyway. Basil sighed.

...

*Basil stared into the shadows of the trees looming ahead of him.*

*It was very dark. At least he'd be able to know for sure that Sunny wouldn't be able to see him.*

*Basil felt rather nervous about approaching the forest by himself, but he swallowed that fear as the lightning flashed overhead once again. This would only take a second.*

*As frightening as they could be, the trees really were beautiful at night.*

...

*The harsh wind blew the trees in Basil's direction. It almost seemed as if they were beckoning to him.*

...

*Why were they moving like that?*

...

*No...*

*Something about this wasn't right.*

...

**Suddenly, the world ahead of Basil began to warp and bend. The trees seemed to tilt sideways at an unnatural angle. The ground itself began to spiral forward, as if pushing Basil into the forest by sheer force. A terrible smell filled his nose.**

**Basil tried to scramble backwards but the ground only pulled at him faster. Leaves blew out of the trees and began to cover his mouth and nose, suffocating him. He pulled them**

**off but they only started to stretch and fold over his eyes instead.**

**Basil desperately clawed at his face to remove the leaves, but when he cleared his vision he wasn't even tumbling towards the forest anymore.**

**He was simply falling into a pit that went on forever. The ground beneath his feet had become an enormous slope that he had no hope of possibly fighting against. Basil's body was brutally beaten against the sharp stones beneath him as he continued falling further.**

**The world quickly transformed before his eyes. Basil fell through an empty house and into an empty box and into an empty room and into an empty bed and into an empty grave.**

**Basil tried to crawl out of the grave but all the bits of metal had already shredded his legs. He tore out Aubrey's bloody nails and threw them on the ground as he fell over but she just kept bashing his head in again and again while the other four just stood and watched it happen**

**as basil's own head started collapsing in on itself, he began to lose his ability to discern one memory from another**

**there was a rope following him and hair surrounding him and eyes watching him and broken violins playing for him with ruined photos and bad photos and hidden boxes and sticky notes and scary books and pictures of sunny and pictures of mewo and gardening shears and bloody tissues and sharp stitches and glass from vending machines and knives from campfires and tape around his arms and bottomless valleys and the burning stench of alcohol from aubreys house and the sound of someone crying from behind a locked door**

**basil knocked but the door wasn't open couldn't open why would the door never open whose door was this whose room was this sunny wake sunny please wake up**

**his lungs are filled with fluid and his hands are covered in blood and there's a hole in his stomach and a rope around his n-**

*Basil sat beside his grandmother and waited silently for the nurses to enter the room, but it wouldn't have mattered even if they did. She was already dead.*

*Mari sighed and placed her hand on his shoulder.*

*Basil woke up screaming.*

# Hold Still

Chapter Summary

> I finally bit the bullet and swapped the rating for this story from 'mature' to 'explicit.' Obviously this isn't a smut/torture fic or anything like that, but a considerable amount of its content is graphic enough that the 'E' category makes me feel a little less guilty.
>
> Thanks for joining me this far. Have a nice day.

The mock bedroom was quiet, but for the first time since Sunny's descent into hell, the bed itself no longer haunts him. Neither him or Basil had spoken for a long while now, but their shared silence had stopped feeling so frightening or painful. The gloom in the air still persisted, but it was matched by an almost equal aura of somber acceptance. There was a strange sense of calm lingering in the room. Despite all the nightmarish words which had been spoken between Sunny and his friend, all of those insults felt largely meaningless now. Their quiet reconciliation steadily melted away at the fear and misery which had been eating Sunny alive.

The room felt neither warm nor cold, neither frightening nor relaxing. For the first time in a long time, Sunny felt as if everything just... *was.*

A tiny stream of dull blue light fled into the room from outside. Rain continued beating against the side of the building. Sunny almost felt as if the storm was crying for them. Maybe the world outside was offering them a slight apology.

...

*Or maybe it was still too early to tell.*

...

Sunny couldn't deny that he wished Basil was still talking to him, but the newfound lack of dialogue was not necessarily unpleasant. Even if it wasn't exactly painless yet, their unsteady relationship had undeniably improved.

*But the same could not be said for Sunny's physical condition.* As much as he desired rest, the pulsating pain inside of Sunny's skull seemed intent on forcibly keeping it from him.

Sunny couldn't blame his companion for what he'd done during their brief altercation, but Sunny also could not deny that Basil's nails had done a number on his head. It was only a small scratch on a (fresh) wound, but that didn't seem to have mattered. It felt as though Sunny's brain was now fully intent on leaking out for the world to see.

The steady throbbing feeling had seemingly evolved into a new form after Basil's flailing attack. The rhythmic pulses of suffering Sunny endured had been replaced by an almost-erratic buzzing sensation.

*Buzz Buzz.*

...

*That seemed really bad.*

But at the very least, his struggle was a bit more entertaining than before. Sunny closed his eyes and pretended that there was a disco ball spinning rapidly inside his skull.

...

*A disco ball that was on fire.*

*A disco ball that was on fire and covered in rusty nails.*

...

This was getting out of hand.

But despite Sunny's newfound suffering, that bizarre pain was far from the most concerning change which now troubled him.

Ever since his brief tangent in the bathroom, Sunny's occasional hallucinations seemed as if they were growing stronger. The chittering spiders no longer haunted him, but it still seemed as if the walls themselves were trying to come to life.

Sunny would blink and the room would be filled with color, only to blink again and watch it all return to normal. Purples and blues flickered through the darkness, with almost-imperceptible changes in the bedsheets temporarily coming into reality before vanishing again. Sunny could have sworn that tiny galaxies were spiraling faintly within the fabric which covered him.

It would have almost been a bit entertaining, but hallucinating in general still seemed very bad... *especially at a time like this.*

Regardless, anything to distract Sunny from the pain inside his skull was tentatively welcome.

*Sunny watched the room once again flicker through shades of blue and purple, with tiny sparkles of light fading in and out around him. It all looked somewhat familiar, but he was having a bit of difficulty remembering why that was the case.*

*Sunny was sure of one thing, though.* The soft shifting of colors reminded him strongly of his dreamland. His imaginary headspace.

It would have almost been nice to see that world again for a brief moment, if not for the fact that his imagination was now seemingly attempting to escape his head.

Sunny slowly began to grow uneasy again. He had been trying to enjoy the brief calm while it lasted, but he wasn't so lazy as to ignore the distressing condition that he'd put himself in.

Sunny had no way of definitively establishing why his occasional hallucinations were getting worse, as there was no viable way to measure the change. *Had he simply been losing his mind more and more from all the stressful experiences they'd both endured? Was there really something seriously wrong with his head after all of the physical injuries he'd sustained?*

*'You clearly have brain damage-'* is what Basil had said to him earlier. Sunny assumed that the blonde was just trying to be mean, but that momentary insult no longer seemed quite as vapid as it had before.

*Sunny exhaled as the room flickered again for a brief moment. He tried to calm down. There was nothing he could do about it right now.*

Or so he thought, but as Sunny calmed his breath, the world around him also seemed to slow down slightly. The delusions became a tad less frequent, and a tad less visible.

*So that's what Sunny would do.* He'd simply try to keep himself calm, and let his throbbing skull calm down with him.

Sunny didn't know anything about brains. He had no idea at what point he was in serious danger, but he at least knew that all the panic he had experienced was only ever making everything worse.

...

Sunny held back the impulse to yawn. He didn't want to risk waking Basil up if the other boy was already asleep. Sunny had a creeping feeling that Basil might have still been awake, but he was too afraid to rotate his head and discern whether or not that was truly the case.

Sunny was unsure if that fear was because he wanted Basil to be asleep, or if he wanted Basil to be awake.

Sunny eventually decided that it might be better just not to know.

...

*Sunny's head hurt. This sucked.*

...

It was a bit counterproductive to his goal of remaining calm, but Sunny began to consider what their options were going to be upon waking up tomorrow morning.

*No one was coming to the building.* The situation they were in was perilous enough by now that continuing to wait and hope that a third party was finally going to magically appear and save them seemed increasingly unreasonable. Both Sunny and his friend needed to acknowledge the bizarre-yet-undeniable possibility that they really weren't going to be found by anyone if they stayed in this place.

As dangerous as it seemed for either of them to be wandering the world outside, continuing to hold out here for an eternity was simply not possible. They still had some food remaining,

but to say their current diet lacked nutritional value would likely be an understatement. Sunny wouldn't usually concern himself with something like that (health concerns were more Basil's thing) but without any real food to consume, their physical conditions were just as likely to deteriorate as they were to improve.

*And Sunny couldn't risk deteriorating any further.*

Waiting in the building for another day would increase the odds that someone might finally find them, but it would also further deplete the limited physical resources which they were already steadily losing.

As of tomorrow morning, reassessing their plans for escape seemed imperative. Basil wasn't going to like it, but things were likely decomposing too fast to avoid poking their heads outside.

Though for now, all Sunny could do was hope that the rain would finally stop sooner rather than later. Even if the world outside was heating up again, cold rain wasn't any better than cold snow. In a lot of ways, it was actually worse.

Sunny took a breath and tried to mentally prepare himself for the possibility that Basil would insist upon leaving the building by himself. Sunny felt like such an argument was a bit unlikely at this point, but it would not be unimaginable for Basil to try and sacrifice himself again.

*Regardless, Sunny would never allow that to happen.*

...

Sunny finally loses to his curiosity, and rotates his head to take a hesitant glance at the opposite side of the bed. Basil was curled up and facing the door. Based on the way he was breathing, it appeared as if Sunny's friend really was asleep again.

Sunny felt himself exhale slightly. He was glad that at least one of them was able to continue getting rest. Basil clearly needed it.

...

Sunny struggled to prevent himself from thinking about all the ridiculously embarrassing admissions he'd made to his friend only a few hours ago. Even if the two of them seemed to be (sort of) getting along again, that fact did nothing to cover up how **exposed** Sunny now felt.

*Did he really need to say all that stuff so bluntly? Couldn't he have worked everything out in a slightly less-direct way?*

*Basil was easily agitated, and easily embarrassed. Saying all those things to him might've actually backfired on Sunny in the end. What if everything became awkward again? Would it be his fault? Was all the awkwardness still inevitable, even after everything the two of them had already shared with one another? Did it ever end?*

...

*Sunny stole another glance at his companion. Basil still had not moved at all. Definitely asleep.*

*Good.*

...

However, it seemed as if Basil was breathing a bit heavily as he slept. That wasn't really like him.

The other boy's breaths were becoming increasingly audible even from the opposite side of the massive bed. Sunny wondered if maybe Basil was having a strange dr-

***Sunny's entire body jumped in place as soon as Basil started screaming.***

***Sunny immediately reached for a steak knife that he didn't have. The sudden, overwhelming terror almost caused him to topple off the side of the bed.***

*Sunny's panicked gaze flew to the door for a moment. It lingered there for a few seconds before Sunny finally realized that nothing had changed. Basil was screaming, but there was no one there. His friend had only experienced some kind of terrible nightmare.*

*Basil sat up and violently whipped his head back and forth. The blonde quickly glanced around in a panic as if trying to come to terms with where he was. Sunny was all too familiar with that very same feeling, but watching Basil go through such an intense bout of it was still nothing short of traumatic.*

*Once the scream had concluded, Basil quickly stopped moving. His body relaxed. He returned to reality once again. His arms still shook, but he'd regained most of his composure.*

*The blonde rotated his neck one last time, and locked eyes with Sunny.*

*Sunny just stared at him with wide eyes. Basil's mouth hung open slightly. Neither said a word.*

*The blonde's breath began to slow again.*

*Sunny watched as Basil gently pressed his face into his hands.*

---

...

*The pair sat in silence once again. Dim blue light from outside continued to crawl into their little coffin.*

*Sunny asked Basil if he was okay, and Basil said that he was. Basil apologized for screaming, and Sunny said that it was fine. Sunny asked if Basil wanted to talk about it, and Basil confirmed that he did not. The status quo was firmly reinstated.*

After a few minutes spent sitting up, Basil finally seemed to return to his previous position. The blonde laid back down on his side.

But in spite of that change, it could not have been more obvious that Sunny's friend was not about to fall asleep again anytime soon. Sunny kept his mouth shut, though. The other boy didn't want to press Basil any more than he already had. Sleep and rest were not interchangeable concepts, but rest was likely still far better than nothing.

As for Sunny, he had already abandoned his remaining hope of falling asleep. Maybe once the sun itself finally set he would have a better shot at it.

Sunny watched as the dull colors of their room slowly flickered to life once more.

...

*The pitiable silence persisted for a while longer.*

...

But after a few minutes, Basil sat back up in the darkness. The blonde began quietly facing the foot of the bed. Sunny expected that his friend was about to speak, but nothing seemed to leave Basil's mouth just yet.

...

*Basil was awake. Should Sunny say something again? Was it more selfish to distract him or more selfish to continue ignoring his restlessness?*

...

*What would Basil be thinking about right now? Would he be hesitating to say something too? Maybe Basil felt the exact same way that Sunny did and was just trying to be polite.*

*Was it wrong to spend so much time wondering what was going on inside of another person's head? Was there even any point to it?*

...

"Sunny."

"Yeah?" Sunny replied.

*Basil said his name.*

"Do you mind if I turn the light on?" Basil asked.

“No.”

Basil flicked something to his right, and the fancy lamp propped up by the side of the bed suddenly flashed on. There was a fraction of pale light still streaming in from the window, but the lamp's harsh glow made it a lot easier to see.

Basil promptly turned back to his previous position and resumed facing the wall opposite the bed.

Sunny rotated his body to glance at his friend, but he refused to look directly at Basil’s face. He felt that any more eye contact would have likely been rather embarrassing for them both.

...

*To Sunny's confusion, Basil flicked the lamp back off again. Maybe he only needed it turned on momentarily so that he could search for something, but if that were the case then Sunny had not noticed whatever it was that he'd been looking for.*

...

*Or maybe Basil had just changed his mind.*

...

“Everything okay?” Sunny asked again.

*It might have just been his imagination, but Sunny thought for a brief moment that Basil had flinched.*

...

***Why wasn't he saying anything?***

...

*After a brief pause, Basil finally rotated his body so that he was facing his companion. Sunny* ***did*** *flinch. Basil uncovered himself from the blanket and crossed his legs, still hesitating to respond.*

*With each passing second Sunny became increasingly sure that Basil was about to say something important, but the silence between them persisted.*

...

*Sunny felt a bit nauseous. If either hesitated any longer, things were about to become extremely uncomfortable.*

...

“Sunny.”

Basil spoke again.

“Yes?”

*Basil reached out and pat the side of the bed as if beckoning Sunny to sit up and join him.*

*Sunny's heartbeat stuttered slightly. He swallowed.*

Sunny uncovered himself and sat up before turning towards Basil. He felt that it would have been even more awkward to refuse to look at Basil’s face while pointed directly at him, so Sunny and his friend locked eyes once more. Sunny crossed his own legs, doing his best to match Basil's stance. He tried to follow along with whatever it was that his friend wanted from him right now.

Sunny nervously inspected his companion. Basil looked a little pale, but he seemed okay.

*But the blonde's eyebrows lowered a bit. Basil frowned slightly.*

*Sunny didn't really understand what that meant.*

Basil's face regained a tinge of color. His ears became slightly pink with what must have been embarrassment. Sunny felt a slight impulse to apologize for making his friend uncomfortable… *but in all fairness, the only thing he had done was sit up as instructed.*

…

*Basil pat the bed again, a bit more insistently this time. Sunny frowned.*

...

*Oh.*

…

Sunny scooted himself a bit closer… *but he couldn't maintain eye contact any more.*

He simply stared down at the empty bed space that remained between them after his minor relocation. Basil ended up scooting forward as well.

*The two of them were now close enough to touch.*

Sunny's heart suddenly felt like it was attempting to pump blood backwards, but he did his best to ignore it.

“S-Sunny.” Basil whispered this time.

*Sunny lifted his head. The other boy stared directly at him.*

*For a few moments the sensation of Basil’s gaze remained intensely uncomfortable, but eventually their continued staring contest became almost normal. Sunny lost track of how many seconds they ended up staring at each other, but altogether it felt like an eternity.*

***Basil suddenly reached out his hand towards the side of his friend’s face.*** *Sunny flinched again.*

...

“Is this okay?” Basil mumbled a vague question.

*Sunny wasn’t quite sure what ‘this’ was, but he nodded slightly anyway.*

Basil placed his hand on the side of Sunny’s face, and slowly removed the eyepatch from his head. Sunny felt a tiny chill run down his spine.

Basil leaned forward a bit more, and gently picked off the bandage which had been hiding underneath. Sunny couldn’t see it himself, but his empty socket was now exposed.

Sunny fidgeted slightly. He hoped that it didn’t look too gross… *but it didn't seem like Basil cared either way.* The blonde inspected his missing eye even more slowly this time.

Basil placed both hands on Sunny’s head, and manually rotated his friend’s face in order to get a good look from all possible angles. Sunny felt like he was undergoing the single most-awkward optometrist visit of all time.

*But Basil’s invasive hands didn’t feel too bad. At all.*

After their silent exchange was finally over, Basil removed his hands and leaned back again. The blonde's expression was slightly gloomier than it had been before, but he still wore some sort of gentle determination on his face… *as if what he'd seen was an inevitability.*

...

Since Basil wasn't speaking, Sunny remained silent alongside him. Sunny expected that Basil was about to put his eyepatch back on or offer him a new bandage, but the other boy said nothing.

Sunny watched as Basil placed both hands on the bottom of his own shirt. The blonde seemed to hesitate slightly.

Sunny was confused for a brief moment before quickly returning to reality. Basil was about to lift his shirt up and let Sunny see his wound again.

The other boy considered telling his friend that he didn't have to do that, but Sunny held his tongue. The trade would be fair, and if this was what Basil wanted then Sunny wouldn't try to stop him.

Sunny steeled his own nerves… *and watched in silence as Basil finally took his shirt off.*

*Took his…*

***Uh?***

Basil completely removed the grey sweatshirt he had been wearing and placed it beside him. Even in its now-crumpled state, the cartoon spider on the front of the shirt still seemed as if it was laughing at Sunny.

Sunny’s breath halted for a moment before he finally came to terms with the fact that Basil had just disrobed in front of him.

Basil craned his neck downward and was poking at the edges of his own wound, pushing the skin around slightly to see how the stitches would react.

After recovering from his initial shock, Sunny began to watch the other boy’s self-examination. He struggled to focus his gaze in the vain hope that staring directly at the wound itself would prevent his eyes from wandering anywhere else.

Basil turned his head upwards slightly, as if to make sure Sunny was watching. Their eyes met again, and Basil’s mouth opened.

“Do you think it l-looks okay?” He asked.

…

“Yes.” Sunny answered without thinking.

Basil’s brow tilted for a moment as if mildly surprised, but then the corner of his mouth lifted. He almost smirked… *almost.*

*Sunny recomposed himself slightly, and reconsidered what he’d just said. In reality, Basil’s wound looked even more horrific now than it had the last time, but Sunny was worried saying something like that aloud might cause his friend some amount of distress, so he kept his mouth shut.*

The edges of the wound looked very pink and swollen, as if the cut itself had been repeatedly irritated. Sunny didn't know much about first aid, but he had to assume that Basil's constant stress and poor diet couldn't have been doing his body any favors. The wound itself was visibly healing... *but the excessive swelling still made it look particularly painful.*

“Does it hurt?” Sunny asked.

“Yeah. It hurts a lot.” Basil admitted.

...

*As Sunny's eyes slowly drifted, he absentmindedly took notice of a strange bruise on Basil's side. It was tiny, but held a few little red dots in the center, like a cluster of bug bites.*

*Sunny considered asking Basil if he knew where that strange mark had come from, but the blonde immediately distracted him. Sunny's curiosity fizzled out under Basil's nerve-wracking gaze.*

…

Basil looked back up from his wound again and silently stared Sunny in the face. He seemed to be waiting for something.

“What?” Sunny asked.

*Basil’s face reddened even more than before. He broke eye contact for a brief moment, then looked back again.*

“It’s y-your turn.” Basil mumbled.

*Sunny didn’t get it.*

The blonde gently gestured to the bottom of Sunny’s shirt.

*Oh.*

Sunny swallowed as he quickly removed his own shirt, hoping that if he got the action over with as swiftly as possible that doing so would bring an immediate end to any potential embarrassment for either of them.

*Sunny’s shirt was thereby removed. Sunny was now shirtless. Fair was fair.*

*Basil leaned forward and seemingly began to examine the cut on Sunny’s shoulder, but his hands were visibly shaking this time. He seemed equally distracted.*

Sunny began to wonder if he had somehow misread what Basil had wanted.

But the other boy found that difficult to believe. Sunny knew that he was very (very) stupid, but he felt like even he could tell that this medical examination was going into... *unnecessary detail.*

...

*Basil's hand was lingering around the cut on his shoulder, but it had become obvious to Sunny that he was no longer inspecting it. The way the other boy's hand was moving made it feel more like Basil was petting him.*

*In truth, Basil was barely touching him at all... but even that hesitant contact sent chills down Sunny's spine. The hairs on his arms stood up.*

*Basil's fingers traced along the edge of the cut for a moment, before moving towards his arm and softly rubbing across Sunny's shoulder blade. Sunny felt the warmth of Basil's palm.*

*Sunny remained quiet but glanced at his friend's expression. Basil's face was soft and sad.*

...

"It feels like all we ever do is hurt each other, doesn't it?" Basil asked.

"That isn't true." Sunny denied.

*Basil didn't say anything in response. He just smiled slightly.*

The blonde's hand was removed from Sunny's shoulder. Sunny silently lamented the sudden loss. Sunny watched as Basil slowly put his shirt back on.

*Sunny felt a little disappointed, but he wasn't exactly sure why. He tried to ignore his pointless dismay.*

Sunny pushed down that embarrassing feeling and focused on following in his friend's stead. The younger boy put his own shirt back on.

Both were promptly re-clothed. Sunny had assumed that meant their brief medical examination was now over, but strangely enough Basil still reached towards him.

Sunny flinched as Basil's hands were once again planted on his cheeks. It was the exact same grasp as before, and yet Sunny now felt far more exposed, somehow. *Vulnerable.*

*Sunny's face was on fire, but Basil's hands felt cool by comparison. The throbbing in Sunny's head suddenly felt miniscule compared to the overwhelming feeling of Basil's palms against his skin.*

*Sunny kept waiting for his friend to start moving his head again, but Basil's hands only lingered in place.*

*Sunny almost began to panic as it dawned on him that Basil had started to softly rub the sides of his face with his thumbs.*

*Sunny froze up completely for the few seconds that Basil's thumbs continued tracing him. It felt like an eternity was spent in that moment, but Basil quickly removed one of his hands again. Basil's right hand reached out directly towards Sunny's skull, and lingered there. Sunny felt the almost-imperceptible sensation of the other boy's nail passing under the edge of the adhesive bandage on his forehead.*

"Sunny." Basil whispered.

*Basil's friend caught chills again.*

"Yes." Sunny confirmed.

"Brace yourself, okay?"

*"Okay."*

***The brief few seconds wherein Basil removed the bandage were absolutely excruciating***. For a moment, all Sunny could register was the intensity of his pain. The sharp, burning sensation of the bandage being slowly torn away from his head was utterly agonizing.

*Stars filled his vision. Sunny almost felt as though he was going to pass out.*

But after what felt like an eternity, the suffering finally came to a close. Sunny managed to return to reality once the bandage was removed. The wound on his head now ached slightly more than it had before, but there was still something strangely calming in feeling that the bandage had finally been taken off.

Sunny blinked the tears out of his eye, and refocused himself on Basil. The blonde's expression had instantly soured.

"Ow." Sunny joked.

Basil grimaced even harder as he continued examining Sunny's bloody forehead.

Sunny knew it must have looked really gross. He suddenly felt the impulse to move away, but the younger boy rationalized that Basil was the one who had decided to peer into his head to begin with.

So Sunny continued sitting in silence.

As the blonde resumed his inspection, Basil's other thumb had begun to slowly stroke Sunny's cheek once more. It was embarrassing, but Sunny refused to pull away from it.

...

*Basil fell silent. After a few more moments, the blonde's thumb had slowed.*

*Sunny waited for whatever Basil intended to do next. He'd assumed that his friend would probably begin to bandage him up again, but the first aid kit still lingered on the floor beside the bed. Basil hadn't even glanced in its direction a single time. It continued sitting alone beside the blonde's abandoned seafaring hat.*

"There's something... my grandma used to do." Basil mumbled. "I'm not sure if it w-would help, but..."

*Sunny said nothing. He didn't know what Basil was talking about.*

...

"Sunny." Basil whispered again. "You have to h-hold still, okay?"

...

*Sunny was still as a statue. The blonde's face turned red.*

...

*Basil quickly leaned forward and planted a gentle kiss on the side of Sunny's forehead, just opposite the wound he now wore.*

*Sunny's heart stopped.*

*Basil's head came back down again. Sunny could feel every one of his friend's shaky exhalations passing over his face. He flinched as Basil gently pushed a cluster of black hairs away from his empty socket. Basil whispered.*

"Do you think I could ever m-make it up to you?"

*Sunny couldn't possibly say anything. Too close.*

"Or, I mean..."

"..."

"Would it be okay if I tried?"

...

"Try h-how?" Sunny mumbled.

*Basil's eyelids lowered. The blonde's gaze dropped slightly.*

*Sunny was starting to feel lightheaded.*

...

*Sunny struggled in vain to prepare himself for what was about to happen, but he couldn't. His heart violently palpitated out of his control.*

*Basil visibly hesitated to move again. Both of them were breathing heavily. Basil's lips parted slightly.*

"It's like the r-rest of the world f-forgot about us, d-don't you think?" Basil stuttered. Sunny's friend appeared to be stalling.

"Y-Yeah." Sunny agreed.

"Makes you k-kind of lonely, doesn't it?"

"Yeah."

*Sunny's friend drifted even closer.*

...

...

*Sunny closes his eyes, and feels Basil's lips gently press against his own. The tip of his friend's tongue silently crept into his mouth.*

*The next few moments of Sunny's life turned into a vague blur. For the first time in longer than he could remember, his fragile mind fell silent.*

*Eventually, Basil pulled away again. The blonde stared at his friend in disbelief, even though it was Basil himself who had initiated the contact. Sunny waited for his friend to say something, but ended up leaning forward instead. He was too impatient to bother holding back anymore.*

*Sunny took the lead this time. His friend only whimpered.*

*...*

*Sunny pulled away after a few more moments. He felt unsure that he was doing it right. Sunny wanted to ask his friend if he was okay to keep going, but if there were any more words left inside Sunny's mouth then Basil had already stolen them away.*

*And yet, in spite of the guilt that plagued him, Sunny found himself incapable of looking away. His eyes were firmly locked on Basil, as if by their own choice.*

*Sunny kept waiting for the moment where Basil would turn away. Over and over he expected that Basil was just about to admit that he couldn't take anymore. Sunny waited for Basil to demand his friend stop staring as the other boy had done so many times before. One more moment and then it would be over.*

*But that demand never came. Rather than looking away, Basil only continued staring back. To Sunny's surprise, the blonde's broken glances had been quietly replaced by a steady, prolonged gaze. The endless suffering which lingered in the other boy's eyes had silently faded into some form of hesitant curiosity.*

*Sunny felt his face swiftly heating up again. He wasn't sure if Basil had noticed it yet, but the table between them had begun to turn. Sunny was suddenly struck by an almost uncontrollable desire to look away.*

*But of course he couldn't... not after something like that.*

*Yet the embarrassment flowing through his skin persisted regardless. Sunny's agitated body remained entirely unconcerned by his brain's childish notions of fairness. Sunny didn't think his face could get any warmer, but that guess was repeatedly proven wrong with every passing moment.*

*Basil's eyes were very blue. Sometimes Sunny forgot how very blue they were.*

*Deep down, Sunny did not feel like he had the right to look away from Basil. If the tears in his friend's eyes were his fault, then looking away wasn't right of him. Sunny had spent so long turning his back on Basil. After everything that had happened, he was determined keep his eyes on his friend for as long as either of them needed.*

*...*

*No. That was wrong. Sunny was trying to pretend he was being selfless, but that was just a convenient lie.*

*Sunny wanted to look at Basil, because he liked looking at Basil. That was all there was to it.*

*But doing so still hurt him. Looking at Basil did far more to Sunny than make his face turn red.*

*The inside of Sunny's head felt incredibly fuzzy. Even if he tried to hold a single logical thought in his brain, he was almost certain that he wouldn't be able to.*

*The staring contest persisted. Both seemed to wait for the other with baited breath, as if unsure of what they were doing or where it was supposed to stop.*

*...*

*But at some point, the leering came to an end.*

*At some point, Sunny leaned towards his friend again. Their little game resumed.*

*At some point, Sunny found himself looming over Basil. Maybe he had pushed Basil down, or maybe Basil had pulled him forward. Sunny wasn't sure.*

*Sunny stared Basil in the face as the other boy gazed up at him. Their eyes intertwined in a way that was going to drive Sunny mad.*

*Basil tilted his head forward a bit as if to gently coax his friend to start over again.*

***So that's what Sunny does.***

# Little Red Hands

When they were younger, Sunny would always have to steal his glances at Basil. It was often difficult, but there was a method to it. You had to catch Basil while he was distracted. Sunny felt that it was rather hypocritical for a stealth photographer like his friend to be so uncomfortable when put under someone else's gaze, but that criticism did nothing to quell Basil's notable distress.

"Our friends are actually worth looking at, though... h-haha."

*Basil would create strange arguments in his own defense.*

But Sunny couldn't change it. That was just the way Basil always behaved. Despite what anyone else might have thought of him, Sunny's companion still hid himself behind an unassuming veil of secrecy. Even when incidentally pressed into the center of attention by his friends, Basil always tended to worm his way back out of it. As such, it was often rare that one would catch an excuse to take a prolonged glimpse at Basil.

But such a barrier could be overcome. Sunny knew his friend's tricks. Just as Basil would employ stealth and evasion when taking his photos, so too would Sunny steal those same methods in order to catch the blonde off guard.

Even if Sunny's friend was a wary creature by nature, that trait could be cautiously superseded under the right conditions.

*And Sunny knew the perfect locale to pull off his ocular heist.*

Inside his garden was the one place where a diligent viewer could always snag a worthwhile view of Basil. At no other point was the little farmer more distracted than when surrounded by his own kind.

That's what was so special about it. When alone in the garden, Basil was entirely himself. It was the only environment Sunny knew where his friend's silent transformation would invariably take place. Basil always seemed to step away from his anxieties and insecurities when his focus was drawn out of himself and set upon their natural habitat instead.

So on the rare days when he and Basil were completely isolated together amongst those petals and stems, Sunny often felt as if he might actually stare a hole directly into his friend’s head. No matter how much he tried, Sunny could never help himself.

Basil hated being stared at. For as long as Sunny had known him, a prolonged gaze had always made Basil nervous. There was no faster way to make the blonde a bit uncomfortable than to simply pry him open with your eyes. Sunny knew that fact all too well… *but it was often indescribably difficult for the younger boy to avoid getting his attention stuck on such an enthralling display.*

After all, there was some kind of strange magic that existed in the garden. It brought out something within Basil that always managed to completely transfix Sunny, even if Basil's friend could never really understand why.

Basil was more talkative in the garden. That was one of its best features. The more you could get Basil to speak, the longer he would allow you to stare at him. As such, Sunny often tried his hardest to enable Basil's quiet rants and lectures.

However, the *'subtle art of friendly conversation'* (as Mari called it) did not come naturally to Sunny. Knowing exactly what to say and when seemed like an unfathomable, alien concept to him.

*In other words, he was bad at it.*

Luckily for Sunny, enabling conversation with Basil was at least a little easier than doing so with most of his other friends. When in the garden, the ideal method to both get and keep Basil talking was to simply ask him about whatever it was that he had growing at the time. The blonde would always be more than happy to fill you in on the current condition of his meager sprouts.

In comparison to Sunny's other companions, Basil always came across as a bit more... *passionate*, regarding his hobbies. It wasn't that Sunny's other friends didn't have plenty of their own interests to share... Basil was just slightly more eager to share his own.

But to Sunny, that joyful enthusiasm carried a tiny hint of tragedy. Unlike the rest of their friend group, Basil always acted as if he was surprised by even the slightest expression of interest in his hobbies.

*Maybe that's why Basil was always so excited to share them. It seemed as if being given an opportunity to express himself was something that held more novelty to Basil than to Sunny's other friends.*

And yet, even Basil's own enthusiasm would often be cautiously concealed. The blonde had a tendency to apologize for rambling on too long about any given topic, even though Sunny was usually the one who had inquired about that topic in the first place.

Sunny didn't know how to adequately explain to Basil that if he didn't want to hear him talk, he just wouldn't have asked.

Basil's friend eventually decided that he wanted the gardener to feel more comfortable speaking his own mind, so as the two of them got older, Sunny began to go out of his own way to find them both excuses to talk.

It became an undeniably rewarding pastime. Basil always seemed happy about Sunny's efforts, even if Sunny himself never really understood why. After all, Basil was the one doing 90% of the talking during their *'conversations.'* Sunny was about as verbally engaging as Mewo's litter box.

*Regardless, Basil still seemed happy... so Sunny felt happy, too.*

But even so, Sunny felt a little bit bad whenever he paused to consider his hidden ambitions. The interest he expressed in his friend's hobbies was far from fake, but Sunny would have been lying if he'd tried to act as if expressing that interest came with no ulterior motives. An excuse to talk was an excuse to stare, after all.

But in the end, even the dialogue about flowers and herbs would die out eventually. There were only so many times that Sunny could ask the same old questions about the same old plants before Basil would finally catch onto him.

As such, some amount of *'conversational diversification'* became necessary. The little black-haired confidant could not rely on a single trick to carry him forever.

Luckily for Sunny, there was at least one other topic he could always discuss with Basil wherein they both shared the same amount of general knowledge and expertise.

*Their other friends.*

Prompting a conversation about their other companions was not as easy as prompting one about plants, but more often than not Sunny didn't even have to. The blonde would do it for him.

Even without any prior prompting, Basil spoke highly of their friends. Basil was always thinking about everyone else, sharing his concerns about them, showing Sunny the occasional blurry photo of Kel with a smirk on his face...

*Sunny might have been trying to dig up excuses to observe Basil, but no one was a more attentive spectator than Basil himself.*

But even though both Sunny and Basil presumably spent relatively the same amount of time around their other friends (sisters notwithstanding), Basil was seemingly always the first one to notice small changes in their companion's appearance or behavior. Sunny wasn't sure why, but Basil had a tendency to observe hidden elements in people that he was seemingly incapable of discovering within the same span of time.

*Sunny sometimes found it rather strange.*

Maybe it was unfair for Sunny to judge himself too harshly for his own lack of perception (he was not the one taking constant photos of their friends, after all), but it still felt a bit odd to him that Basil was so much better at understanding their other friends than he was.

*It was as if Basil could peer into people and easily find the best parts. He and Mari shared that in common. Sunny couldn't exactly say the same was true for himself.*

Out of the two of them, Basil was the one who knew about what concerns they all had, what made them happy, what made them angry...

Sunny might have been the one who knew **Basil** the best, but even that much only felt like a technicality. Sunny simply spent more time around Basil, after all.

In comparison to Sunny, Basil always managed to summarize their friends in a more-complex way. Basil's view of their other friends was, to put it simply, *elaborate.* The blonde seemed to grab hold of their individual eccentricities and display them all expertly, with or without the use of a polaroid.

By comparison, Sunny just... *couldn't.* He didn't have the ability to see other people the way Basil did.

Basil had always told Sunny that he was a good listener, but Sunny didn't really feel as if that were the case. After all, even his desire to listen was often just a thinly-veiled means of achieving his own self-centered ends.

The calculation was obvious: if Sunny's friends were driving the conversation, then Sunny himself did not have to. It was not as if his tendency to listen instead of speak was a noble trait, Sunny simply found life easier that way.

Besides, what was a 'good listener' other than someone who had no real opinions of their own? Wasn't that an excruciatingly boring characteristic to have? What point was there in praising someone for simply remaining a vapid shell?

*Basil listened to their friends because he cared about them. Because he wanted to see them succeed. Because he wanted to see them smile.*

Sunny listened to his friends... *because he couldn't be bothered to do anything else.* He tagged along with their problems because he had no reason not to.

*It was all selfish. Always. All of it was about him. That's the kind of person Sunny was. The kind of person he'd probably always be.*

And yet, listening to Basil sometimes made Sunny wish that wasn't the case.

...

*Sunny had good friends. Friends far better than he was. Friends he would never deserve, although he wasn't fully aware of it back then.*

Whether it was Kel's boundless enthusiasm, Hero's polite patience, Aubrey's infectious fervor, or his sister's quiet, knowing smile… *Sunny had never felt like he matched any of them at anything.* They were each impressive, interesting, capable and kind in ways that he simply couldn't be. Sunny wasn't that smart, but even he could see the obvious differences between him and his companions.

*But even so, there remained something particularly special about **Basil**.*

Basil was not like Sunny's other companions. The boy understood that very well. What he hadn't understood so quickly was the differences themselves.

Being around Sunny's other friends was always fun, but it could be rather tiring. To put it simply, they each moved at a speed which Sunny did not.

Sunny's friends were… *easily themselves.* At least that's the way Sunny saw them. They said what they thought, felt whatever they felt like feeling, and did what pleased them in a relaxed manner which Sunny couldn't help but find admirable. It would have been hard to see them any other way.

*They never seemed to get lost in their daydreams, or in their memories, or find themselves buried under countless bouts of pointlessly-prolonged indifference…*

Sunny's friends never appeared to hold back until it was too late to take action. They never appeared to stretch themselves too thin. Compared to Sunny, their willful energy seemed almost limitless.

In observing them, Sunny began to feel as if he was held back by chains that grew straight-out from inside himself. Meanwhile, those in his life appeared incapable of even seeing such restraints.

They each lived in the world as it was, while Sunny lived in the world as he imagined it. The boy couldn't help but disappear into his own head. No matter how hard he struggled, Sunny's mind would always envelop him in a way which he could never manage to entirely pull himself out of.

It was like a fundamental aspect of himself. Not only did those chains hold him in place, those chains held him together.

So the youngest boy often wasted his time wishing that he could be like his friends instead. He would waste his time wishing that he could say what he thought without restraint. Sunny would fantasize about the idea of living purely in the comfort of himself, without always having to rely on others for everything.

Sunny would wish that he could handle all of the simple bits of life which he frequently found so disconcerting. Sunny wished he could be as smart or hard-working or energetic as they were, even though he knew he never would be.

*Incapable of restraining himself, Sunny would chase after them... but could never catch them. He was too tired, too dull, and too lazy. No matter how often he flailed his legs, Sunny simply could never keep up with his friends.*

They were wide open, while Sunny was locked shut. They hardly seemed to hide anything, because it barely ever seemed as if they had anything to hide in the first place. Sunny's friends weren't always **perfect**, but they each knew how to be themselves.

And so, in Sunny's mind, none of his friends would be able to understand how he felt. Even if the little black-haired creature spoke the strange thoughts he carried in his head, he was sure that nobody else would understand them.

*Nobody except for Basil.*

*Basil was different.*

Even when they were kids, if Sunny looked close enough, or gazed for long enough... *he'd be able to see them.* The invisible restraints. Those tiny, sharply-pointed vines which silently grew out from Basil. The squirming branches and tendrils which held him in place.

Unlike the others, Basil was *hidden.* Something inside of him was almost always out of reach, even if the blonde himself often appeared as if he desired to share it.

To Sunny, it almost felt as though Basil was trapped within a transparent prison. Sunny appeared to be the only one who ever bothered to take note of that hidden cage. From the outside, only he would ever pause long enough to truly view Basil languishing within his little cell.

Whereas Sunny's other friends shared themselves easily, Basil would never cease to hesitate. Whereas his other friends usually seemed confident in their words, Basil almost always appeared unsure.

But Sunny could plainly see the ways in which his friend struggled, because those were struggles which they both could grasp.

*And, in seeing those struggles, those restraints... Sunny was made to feel slightly less alone in them. He wondered if Basil felt the same way.*

Even if his other friends were often far too fast to reach, Sunny would always be able to grab onto Basil. Basil walked at a calm pace, after all. A gentle pace that suited him. One which Sunny could match.

Basil moved slowly, smiled slowly, laughed slowly. When Sunny was around Basil, the world finally seemed to wait for him to catch up.

Sunny never got tired around Basil, and Basil never seemed to get tired around him.

...

*It was easy for Sunny to be Sunny when he was with Basil.*

...

At first, Sunny had thought that simply meant there must have been something slightly wrong with him. There was no 'real' reason for which being with Basil in particular should have been much different than his other friends, after all.

And yet it seemed as if there was no one else in Faraway who was very much like Basil. Sunny's friend possessed some rare kind of softspoken understanding that the other denizens of his hometown failed to replicate. Basil had a slow, gentle demeanor that almost no one around him was actually deserving of… *from Sunny's perspective, at least.*

*Even Sunny himself didn't deserve that kind of patience. The difference between the two of them was undeniable.*

In truth, Sunny definitely wouldn't choose to bother with many of the seemingly-trivial things which Basil often did. If someone else on the playground was causing trouble, Sunny would much rather avoid addressing it at all.

Even if the issue at hand was easily fixable, Sunny would much rather just keep to himself. He stayed out of other people's problems. There was no reason for either of them to interject.

And yet, Basil **did** interject. The blonde went out of his way to dissuade their friend's conflicts. Basil went to great lengths to preserve everyone else's interpersonal harmony, if only because that was the way he preferred things to be.

In watching Basil, Sunny began to feel like maybe his indifference was wrong. Maybe if he just tried harder, he could have been the same way… *but his sister told him to take things like that at his own pace.*

Mari was probably right. As usual.

But whenever the two of them were left alone together, that feeling of subtle inadequacy still returned to Sunny. It was inevitable. After all, Basil was always at his best when the crowd was small. The fewer eyes were on him, the more bizarre and wonderous he became.

*Not that Sunny would ever tell anyone anything like that.*

Every aspect of Basil which stood out from their friends became even more pronounced under the floral boughs and leafy passages of the garden. Maybe it was just Sunny falling into his own daydreams, but Basil's garden always felt far larger each and every time he stepped into it.

It was a minuscule place that had somehow been blessed with a never-ending sense of scope. Even the smallest plants seemed to tower before Sunny's eyes.

But there was no question as to where such an other-worldly blessing had originated. In the garden, Basil often appeared as if he had revealed himself to be some kind of ethereal creature... *a forgotten member of the forest that had fled from the woods and assumed human form. A being that was not truly a part of this world, but had come to converse with its denizens regardless.*

…

*Sunny had an active imagination.*

…

But unfortunately, that imagination wasn't always on his side.

After spending an hour or two listening to Basil, Sunny would often attempt to draw himself and his other friends. Pencil in hand, he would sit quietly by himself and try to capture each of their likenesses with his feeble illustrations. One by one he'd scribble them down onto patches of colorful flowers intended to symbolize Basil's perfect world.

Sometimes Sunny would manage to at least somewhat capture the general essence of Mari or Kel or Hero within his meager sketches, but he always became intensely frustrated whenever he tried to draw the gardener himself.

Sunny wanted to capture his friend exactly as he appeared while surrounded by the leaves and flowers… *but Sunny's aching fingers were repeatedly shown to be incapable of creating anything close to the boy who so often stole his gaze without knowing.*

Even when trying to sketch the blonde from the shadows (with Basil himself unknowingly sitting within Sunny's field of vision), the little artist just could not do it. Every one of his attempts at stealth were ultimately wasted. All of the drawings came out terribly.

It was hopeless. If Sunny wanted to capture any reflection of Basil in those moments, it would likely have to be done as Basil himself would have done it. The blonde would have to be captured in a photograph.

However, Sunny was not much of a photographer. He never really saw the appeal of doing it on his own, nor did he feel particularly proficient at the act itself.

Sunny was almost never the one entrusted to take pictures of his friends. He just wasn't very good at it. He always picked the wrong lighting or the wrong angle… or failed to predict his subject's inevitable movement in time to grab the ideal shot before it disappeared forever. Sunny consistently failed to take hold of subjects who were still in-motion.

But yet every time Sunny saw Basil with that hat, in that garden, with that smile in his eyes… *the urge struck him ceaselessly.* He wanted to take that picture more than anything.

*Sunny wondered if it was even possible to get away with it. He wondered if he could really sneak inside, grab Basil's camera, and steal a photo of him before his friend could catch him in the act.*

But even if the boy did get his wish and managed to snap a picture of his companion, Sunny had wondered if he'd ever be able to admit to it.

It wasn't as if taking a photo of his friend was anything strange, though. Basil took photos of him all the time, after all. *It would only be fair then, wouldn't it?*

...

But even if the other boy allowed it, Basil would still never **like** it. Sunny knew that. Sunny was sure that even if he showed Basil a photo of himself which had been caught in those perfect moments, the other boy still wouldn't get it. Basil just wouldn't be able to see himself the same way that Sunny saw him.

As perceptive as they could be, those blue eyes would never manage to reach into their own reflection. Sunny could do nothing to change it. That's just how people were.

...

*But it didn't matter. If Sunny could capture even a sliver of the smile on Basil's face, then it would be worth it. To Sunny, the desire to freeze those moments in time was itself a worthwhile endeavor.*

*And yet, Sunny never could make it back inside. He never once managed to retrieve the camera, or take the polaroid he dreamed of. He didn't because he couldn't.*

*He was too busy staring. No matter how many times he tried to lift his feet, Sunny would always end up stuck in place. Frozen to the ground with his eyes glued to his best friend's face.*

...

Everything about Basil managed to steal Sunny's attention. In the garden, even the most pointless details somehow ended up enrapturing him.

Sunny didn't understand it. He couldn't understand why even something as simple as the straw hat which Basil wore had begun to transfix his gaze. He analyzed it over and over, but it never made sense.

So the little artist tried his hardest to deconstruct it all. With his pitiful drawings in hand, Sunny tried to discern what it was about Basil that had led his friend to acquire such bizarre and magical properties.

**Maybe it was something about the hat itself?** There was an obvious correlation to be made, after all. Basil almost exclusively wore the hat when he was gardening.

So Sunny inspected the item from every possible angle. He dissected the very essence of it in his search for answers. From what he could tell, the straw hat atop Basil's head was a crown of dual purpose:

*Firstly, it kept his friend's long, blonde locks from flopping into his own face due to the wind during those extended hours spent outside.*

*Secondly, it kept the unforgiving sun from blasting down onto the other boy's pale skin. Sunny's namesake could be very cruel to someone with his friend's complexion.*

Basil sunburned rather easily. Luckily, he was also the most reliable amongst their friends when it came to remembering sunscreen to begin with, so the blonde rarely burned as badly as Sunny's other friends (Kel).

On the hottest summer days, Mari always joked that if the five of them put on too much sunscreen (or if their combined SPF reached too high), Sunny would eventually be rendered incapable approaching them anymore.

And to Sunny’s repeated annoyance, Mari's obnoxious comedy act was not entirely incorrect. He honestly did hate that sunscreen. Its strong chemical smell covered up the natural floral scent Basil usually carried and replaced it with something far less palatable.

*So Sunny ended up getting in trouble with Mari for hiding Basil's sunscreen. He also failed to learn anything about the mysterious straw crown.*

...

But it hardly mattered. Sooner rather than later, Sunny's theory about the magic hat was all but abandoned.

Sunny was forced to set it aside because he kept finding his attention drawn to Basil regardless of the other boy's garment. Even without the hat, Sunny's prolonged observations kept on yielding the same results.

Over and over again Sunny attempted to find some sort of change in Basil, or a strange behavior of his that would have accounted for the blonde's obviously-increasing supernatural abilities, but the tireless spy failed to locate any such evidence despite his countless efforts.

Eventually, Sunny was compelled to conclude that the strange magic really did originate from Basil himself. Sunny might not have noticed it at first, but that was likely because Basil's abilities had been slowly growing greater over time.

Sunny considered confronting his friend over that gradual change, but it was obvious just from looking at Basil that the gardener remained entirely ignorant of his own occult powers.

In the end, Sunny decided that it didn't really matter. He could keep his mouth shut until Basil finally noticed those abilities himself. Probably. The younger boy just hoped that Basil would end up using his powers for good and not evil whenever the time came.

But even though Sunny's quest to find the origin of Basil's power had been set aside, his tendency to gawk at the blonde only seemed to continue growing.

...

*Was it even normal to stare at your best friend as often as he did? Surely it had to be. Mari often tried to scold him for it, but Sunny had to assume that **some** people were okay to stare at.*

*Sunny figured that best friends were probably an exception. As long as they didn't notice, anyway.*

...

And to Sunny's advantage, Basil seemed to notice less and less. Quietly staring and nodding along was so easy, after all. Especially since Sunny was naturally soft-spoken and bad at conversation in general.

Or at least that was usually the case, but when alone with Basil he found it far easier to speak his mind whenever the random impulse struck him. Even if he vastly preferred the listening role, Sunny still attempted to take the little bits of advice that his sister would grant him. Mari told her little brother that he needed to actually practice *'the subtle art of friendly conversation'* if he wanted to improve at it, so that's what Sunny did.

However, in the verdant depths of the garden, things were not so simple. Whenever Basil smiled at him in the way he often did... *Sunny usually found it difficult to open his mouth at all.* When the two of them were left alone in-between the fronds and flowers, Sunny always silently hoped that Basil would just keep talking forever. He hoped and prayed that Basil would not end up asking him any sudden questions, because Sunny would often be caught entirely off-guard by those instantaneous mental challenges.

Basil would ask him a question, and Sunny would be thrust into a petrified silence. The blonde would awkwardly stare at him as Sunny locked up like a broken clock.

**But Sunny couldn't help it**. Even as good of a listener as he might have been, the gardener's friend was not entirely immune to distraction... *and there was nothing more distracting to Sunny than Basil himself.*

Luckily for Sunny, Basil seemed quite used to his extended silences. The blonde would always wait patiently for Sunny's eventual response.

So Sunny used his friend's polite patience as a means of cloaking himself. Paradoxically, it was Sunny's difficulty speaking that saved him from needing to explain himself in detail. If Sunny had not been as verbally-challenged as he was, those awkward silences might have come across as something a bit more incriminating. *Hopefully the heat of the sun overhead would hide the reddening in his cheeks.*

*But while Sunny so often struggled in the garden, Basil only ever seemed to flourish.*

When the two were alone amongst the flowers, Basil's typical embarrassments and anxieties appeared to vanish into thin air. They would all disappear one-by-one in a way that almost made it seem as if they had never even existed at all. Basil's occasional stutter would fail to take hold, and his voice would become increasingly warm and amicable.

Eventually, Basil's voice would begin to rise and fall in a way that Sunny could follow for hours.

The thought of being able to see and hear Basil open up made the garden a particularly appealing place to be for Sunny, as if the countless flowers Basil had planted in the ground were not themselves reason enough to visit his friend's natural habitat for a quiet afternoon or two.

*And so the magic of the garden would inevitably grip Sunny's imagination and run off with it, leaving him trapped within his own waking dreams. Sunny's tireless mind would fly away with no intention of ever returning.*

...

A less-amicable viewer might have told Sunny that it was all in his head, but the daydreamer could still have sworn that the insects in the air sometimes arced around his friend as if propelled by some kind of supernatural force. Sunny watched as even the smallest butterflies landed atop Basil's hat while his friend toiled away in his own little world.

His straw crown would attract life of its own, but the gardener would not even take notice. The garden obviously continued to grant Basil intense supernatural abilities, but it appeared as if the blonde himself was constantly left unaware of his own magical power.

*Sunny just couldn't take it. His friend's blissful self-ignorance was almost maddening to watch.*

Each and every bug in the air visibly twisted and scattered in such a way that only seemed to underline Basil's position as the garden's gentle ruler.

No one else could possibly have been worthy of such a title, after all. Each flower had been planted by Basil, and each pot watered under his quiet blue gaze. All the homes of all the

creatures that lingered in this green world had been granted by him. Basil planted row after row of flower and sprout and herb as if no multitude was ever enough. The winged creatures of Basil's realm took note of the palace he had constructed, and they promptly descended from the skies to populate his garden with their countless children.

Sunny would flinch as he watched Basil trim the leaves from the stalks of flowers while those same flowers were still topped by the busy legs of bumblebees. Basil seemingly paid them no mind, and they paid him no mind in return. Both trusted that the other meant no harm. Basil's fingers would dance mere centimeters from their buzzing wings, but the blonde held no fear in him.

*Sunny could never do that. He always avoided going near the buds which were buzzing with life.*

In Sunny's mind, It almost appeared as if everything in the garden existed merely to accent Basil.

Basil toiled away endlessly at the floral realm he had built, but something about his botanical efforts always struck Sunny as a bit ironic, even if Basil would not see that irony himself.

It was a shame, actually. Sunny had eventually come to realize that none of the colorful flowers which Basil grew were ever going to be as striking as the blonde himself. Sunny's friend had invested so much effort into the garden, but the strangest plant of all would consistently escape his notice.

There was something deeply sad about that. Sunny tried to stop thinking of it, but he never could. The longer he watched Basil build his floral realm, the more it bothered him. It struck Sunny as genuinely tragic that Basil was only ever at his happiest when his attention was completely drawn away from himself.

...

*Sunny was not a particularly passionate individual. At least not when compared to his friends.*

*But the older they both grew, the more passionate Sunny became about Basil.*

*Usually, Sunny and Basil shared their interests openly with one another... but this was one interest for which Sunny would inevitably be left alone.*

*Sunny would be left alone, because Basil would never believe him. Even if he showed Basil each and every one of his failed illustrations, Sunny's friend still wouldn't get it.*

*No matter how hard Sunny tried, Basil would never be able to join him in the simple act of quietly observing his favorite person.*

*Sunny tried his best to watch Basil enough for the both of them.*

---

***Sunny finally breaks away from his friend, and breathes heavily. Basil stares up at him with lidded eyes.***

*Basil's smile is long gone now, his crown of flowers and crown of straw having both been left far behind him. His cheeks are stained by tears, and his eyes are red with an irrepressible sadness. Basil's arms had been marred by his own hands, and his stomach was similarly split in two.*

*This creature was far from his perfect garden now, and the world outside of it had damaged him irreparably.*

*To Sunny, the fact that those scars adorned such a beautiful person was undeniable proof of the fact that this world held no real affection for anyone or anything.*

*He could see it at a single glance. Sunny's friend had been trampled upon. if Basil was truly an herb, then all of his leaves had long ago been crushed into the earth. Sunny had played his own part in Basil's destruction, and that was a fact he could never undo.*

*But yet, Basil persisted. Sunny's friend had not yet faded away into the earth. His stems were torn but he continued growing, slowly and painfully managing to push through all else.*

*Yet that struggle still remained visible on every inch of him. To put it simply, Basil had been decimated by this place. His beautiful hair was ruined. One of his blue eyes held up a swollen purple flag once again. Basil's face was marred by stress and pain and exhaustion.*

*Nevertheless, Sunny is once again captivated.*

*The idea that this world had sought for so long to stretch him to the point of breaking had only made Sunny love his companion even more intensely for the fact that he still remained.*

*Basil's refusal to give up even extended to Sunny himself. Basil's friend knew that he didn't deserve forgiveness… but forgiveness is what he got.*

*In the end, nothing had ever changed for Sunny. He'd always drowned in those eyes on each rare occasion that Basil would let him. It was always impossible for Sunny not to get lost in his friend's gaze… but such an entrapment had never been as inescapable before as in this one moment.*

*Sunny stares down at his friend, and feels his own soul slowly burning itself out. Sunny knew that he was drowning. He was not going to be able to swim back to the surface this time. Basil slowly stole the last of Sunny's breath away. The two of them continued fading into the depths.*

*But maybe this was just how it should have always been.*

*Sunny would jump into the lake beneath him in an attempt to hold onto Basil forever… whether it was safe to do so or not. He'd once again fall into those two little blue pools which seemed to pull all the misery in the world into a single, perfect place…*

**Sunny asserted his own hand onto the side of Basil's face. Basil quietly whimpered... *but then pushed himself deeper into Sunny's grasp.***

*...*

*This was wrong. What they were doing was wrong. It had to be. Of course it did.*

*Stupid as he was, even Sunny understood that continuing this had to be a terrible mistake. To show the full extent of his forbidden affection while they were both still trapped in the depths of hell was nothing short of insanity.*

*But if expressing this love made Sunny evil… then Basil must have been evil, too.*

*In the end, Sunny could no longer restrain himself. One could only feel so guilty for so long, it seemed. Maybe even those who despised themselves more than anything were still just people in the end.*

*Basil felt like a fallen angel but he wasn't. Sunny felt like a disgusting insect but he wasn't. The boy and his friend were, despite their countless unfathomable actions, nothing more than a pair of pathetic little people suffering alone in the darkness.*

*And even if the two of them could not manage to give a single moment of forgiveness to themselves… it slowly began to feel as if they might be able to grant that forgiveness to each other.*

**Sunny leaned back down again, and kissed Basil on the cheek. On the lips. On the neck. Basil only flinches and squirms. The taste of Basil's skin slowly poisons Sunny's mind.**

*Whatever twisted part of Sunny had led him to act in this way, Basil had that part, too. Whatever horrid delusions had driven the little murderer to this one perfect moment, those same nightmares infected his friend. They steadily corrupted each other alongside the gentle intertwining of flesh.*

*And yet even in this moment of perfect closeness, Sunny still cannot fully evade his fears. Over and over he waits for the moment that Basil will fade away. Over and over Sunny waits for the moment that Basil will finally disappear again, or break into pieces, or melt into a pile of squirming legs...*

*But it never happens. The person crying and whimpering beneath him was actually, really,* ***truly*** *Basil. It had taken four long years of wandering, but Sunny had finally found him again.*

*Basil didn't exist too far from his grasp. He didn't live in a world beyond Sunny's understanding. He wasn't some kind of mystical being that would vanish if Sunny's desperate hands reached out to greedily grab at him for as long as they could.*

*Basil was just a person like him. Whenever Sunny reaches out to touch Basil, Basil reaches back. Every time it happens, Sunny becomes more and more sure that the next time he moves his hands, Basil will prevent him. And yet every time those hands do move, Sunny is once again proven wrong.*

*It's like an impossible dance. An endless string of unbelievable, unthinkable blessings. Sunny is pardoned over and over and over again.*

*Warm. Basil was warm. Soft and warm.* ***Real****.*

*Sunny had almost forgotten what the warmth of a real person felt like.*

*Basil cried because he was real. He flinched and whimpered because he was real. Basil was not always happy or helpful or joyful.*

*He was sad. Deeply, horribly miserable. Painfully wracked with guilt and dread that would continue to torment his every waking moment.*

*Basil was not a forest creature adorned with mint green hair. His scalp was blonde and ragged and it always had been.*

*Basil didn't always carry a beautiful crown of flowers atop his head. Usually, it was just the occasional pin. A solemn reflection of something he had lost.*

*But in this moment, Basil's hair was empty. Sunny wished he had a single flower to adorn him with, or an earthy crown befitting someone of his terrible beauty, but he cannot offer him anything at all. For now, Basil's hair is but a painfully empty field of gold.*

**Sunny removed his tongue from Basil's mouth for what must have been the tenth time. Basil leaned forward slightly as Sunny pulled back, as if impulsively attempting to restrain his departure.**

*But after a few seconds apart, the blonde seemed to reorient himself. Even if it was almost impossible to see, Sunny could tell that Basil's eyes still held a flicker of fear.*

*Sunny had begun to feel very anxious about exactly how far this was going, and it appeared as though Basil might have felt the same. Every new feeling in Sunny's head bit at him like razor wire.*

*Sunny stared down at a person who he had wronged in ways that could never be undone. A person who had seen him commit to actions that neither of them would ever recover from.*

*But Sunny doesn't want to think about any of those things... so he simply leans back down and kisses Basil again. He wants to use this powerful expression of love as an excuse to wipe away all of the fears that had plagued them.*

*An expression of love that was beautiful in its honesty, but ugly in its greedy, needy desperation. Every time Sunny pulled away, Basil looked as if he was going to apologize...*

*but before a single word of reassurance could leave Sunny's mouth, Basil leaned forward and kissed him all over again.*

*Sunny didn't have much ability left to think, now. His mind had almost entirely faded away. Their prolonged intertwinements grew almost suffocating, but strangely enough it was the brief moments apart where Sunny truly felt like he couldn't breathe.*

*When overwhelmed by a love like that, even someone like Sunny had difficulty maintaining any remnants of his prior shame. If even Basil could forgive him, then what did Sunny really have to feel bad about?*

*Sunny had been hiding from his guilt, but he had also been hiding* ***behind*** *it. He'd been using his self-loathing as a frightening excuse.*

*When something was your fault, then that at least meant it was under your control. All fault necessitated agency. It was only if one had the capability of making a different choice that any of their actual choices could remain fairly judged and punished.*

*So if one had no ability to choose, then all of life's tragedies really were random accidents. Inescapable nightmares which could never have been avoided in the first place.*

*So, in feeling his boundless guilt, Sunny enabled himself to at least hide from that final nightmare. The horror of accepting that it might really have been nothing more than an accident, and the sin of trying to truly forgive himself.*

*His guilt was a painful curse, but it was also a shield. A safeguard from something painful which Sunny never wanted to see in his own reflection. If Sunny could continue feeling guilt, then that guilt would prove that he had still retained some hint of humanity in spite of the hideous actions he had taken.*

*If one did such as Sunny had done and simply chose to pardon themselves, then that person would be truly, undeniably evil. Someone like that would have to live trapped within their own mind forever, because no one in the real world would ever accept something so grotesque and monstrous. Forgiveness would remain permanently out of reach.*

*For a creature like that, all of life's punishments would be deserved.*

***Deserved****. You've done nothing, and so you've received nothing in return. That's how it worked, didn't it? Forgiveness was not a thing to demand, but an outcome one must become deserving of.*

***But if that were true, then what about them?*** *They had both done something that could likely never be forgiven. If either of them wanted to escape from it all, then the only path was to follow her out. Beg and pray that the bottom of the staircase was not the end, so that they might ask her for her forgiveness directly in another life. Beg for a pardoning which neither*

*would ever deserve. Beg to be pardoned from the crime of stealing everything from her... both her life, and her legacy.*

*Yet it seemed as if neither could manage it. Both Sunny and his friend had failed on that account. Neither of them managed to successfully follow Mari into the darkness, no matter how much either of them had obsessed or fantasized over such finality. No matter how terribly they longed for that escape, neither had been able to follow through with it.*

*For Sunny, those desires had been buried under an entire world of fantasies. A false world constructed for the sole purpose of replacing the world which he was too afraid to leave behind. For Basil, those desires finally leaked out… but he'd still failed in his attempt to release them both. The evidence of his mindless desperation would be forever marked on both of their respective bodies.*

***Neither could do it**. They were both too fragile, and too afraid. Each of them were far horrified by that lifeless stare to commit themselves far enough.*

*And so, forgiveness could never be granted. The only person who could grant it to them had already vanished behind a curtain they were both either too weak or too unwilling to finally push through.*

***So what could they possibly do now?** If neither could bring themselves to leave this world behind, then what remained here for them? Were they really expected to just suffer here forever? To lie down and languish in the regret that had taken complete control of their lives? Would that make any difference?*

*Would his sister look down from the heavens and somehow feel happy about it? Feel happy that, at the very least, both of them still hated themselves until the very end? Was there some kind of hidden meaning in their penance?*

*And what about everyone else? Would their other friends observe such boundless suffering and take pity on them? Was it selfish to even hope for that kind of pardon?*

*...*

*They could not earn forgiveness from her, because she was gone forever. They could not earn forgiveness from their friends, because even asking such a thing was impossibly selfish. The five of them barely even knew each other anymore.*

*But Sunny and Basil could still earn forgiveness from each other… because that was still theirs to give.*

*And if they were truly going to stay in this world a little longer, then maybe that was all the two of them could hold onto.*

**Basil's hands wrapped around Sunny's shoulders. The blonde pulled him down and embraced him with a trembling grasp. Basil's hands wandered and flailed about Sunny's spine as if trying to ensure he wouldn't pull away again. Basil began to sob.**

*This was all an act of pathetic desperation. It was nothing short of an animalistic, clawing, brooding attempt to escape from the endless suffering. Neither could take any more punishment, but neither could grant themselves even a hint of leniency, either.*

*That's why Sunny needed Basil, and Basil needed him. For the both of them, there was only one other person in the world who would ever be willing to concede even a fraction of the forgiveness which they both desired so terribly. Sunny gently embraced his weeping accomplice.*

*The two of them were convicts that had been left chained together alone. Any prolonged motions would cause their bindings to strain against each other. Even their pitiful attempts at escape had only led them to unwittingly hurt each other over and over.*

*Both of them had been attempting to pull the chains away from the other, as if to claim all fault for themselves. Both Sunny and his friend had relentlessly obsessed over their own hand in her demise, while cruelly denying the other of any possibility of guilt or wrongdoing. They'd both been desperately trying to save each other from themselves, even if to do so was the very thing which drove them apart.*

*In retrospect, their idiocy was rather obvious, wasn't it? When all was said and done their struggles almost seemed pointless. Once compared to this moment, Sunny couldn't possibly care less about anything else.*

**Sunny starts to feel his sense of self slowly flickering away. With every passing moment of the kissing and touching and grabbing, Sunny has more and more difficulty differentiating where his own body stopped and where Basil’s began. The blonde's eyes seemed to go on forever.**

*Sunny wants to be seen by Basil. Judged by him. He wants the boy in the garden to be the one who finally determines if he was worthy of even a fragment of reprieve from this inescapable darkness.*

*In this moment, Sunny feels as if Basil's view of him was the only one in the world that had ever held any meaning. He doesn't care if the whole world despised him, or if it never granted him any mercy. Sunny just wants Basil to see him as he is, and grant that judgement himself.*

*But to see him as he is, Basil would have to finally pass his gaze through all of Sunny's lies. Deep down, Sunny knew that under all those lies was something truly evil.*

*Sunny is terrified of the truth. He's terrified of being forced to admit that not all of his feelings towards the ruler of the garden were pure. He was terrified of admitting what his monochromatic shell had done to Basil in the depths of their darkest nightmares.*

*Or worse, what thoughts he'd kept isolated in his white room. The dreams that would stay forever locked away beside an unattended laptop and a box of tissues. The memories which Sunny corrupted and hid away so that they would never be able to infect his perfect headspace.*

*But in this moment, Sunny's mask slowly begins to fall away. Sunny expresses his direct, undeniable interest in Basil's body...* ***and Basil reflects that desire right back at him****.*

*Haha... Ahaha...*

*Sunny's manic hunger slowly begins to build. The more Basil enables Sunny's growing sickness, the worse his condition becomes.*

*Did Basil even know what he was doing right now? Didn't Sunny's friend understand that* ***HE*** *had to be the one to put an end to this? Hadn't Sunny already fully displayed his childish lack of restraint?*

*If this kept going, weren't they only going to hurt each other all over again? After all their recent struggles, wasn't this all a bit too much for them?* ***Even now, Basil just kept on sobbing...***

*Did Basil even like this? Or was he just going through with it as some sick form of penitence? Was this really the time or place to be humoring Sunny's constant loss of composure?*

*Wasn't that too cruel of him? Wasn't it mean to go this far just for Sunny's sake? Hadn't they both only just promised to stop lying? Was even a moment like this some kind of elaborate*

*act?*

*Or was Basil just pretending that this was all for his friend, so that he could use that idea as his own personal excuse? Was Sunny's friend going to try and pretend as if he was the only one responsible for this? Did just lying there beneath him make Basil feel as if Sunny was the only one who had a hand in deciding how far this hidden sin would go?*

*Were all of these questions themselves proof of Sunny's fear? His fear that their trust in each other really had been completely corrupted? Did this nightmarish cycle simply go on forever?*

*Would Basil try to play it all off after they escaped from this place? Would he try to ignore what he'd let Sunny get away with down here in their cold little hell? Was all of this just temporary for him?*

***That wasn't fair.*** *Sunny had already shown how hard he'd been trying to hold back, hadn't he? He'd already tried so hard to apologize, hadn't he?*

*Was Basil just allowing Sunny to do this because he was afraid? Was it only because they'd become trapped here that Basil chose to humor Sunny's blatant desire?*

*Didn't Basil understand how cruel that was? Couldn't Sunny's friend see how much something like this meant to him?*

*After all the fighting they'd been doing, would even this much turn into an argument? Why did it always have to end up like this?*

*The shadows inside of Sunny's head grew increasingly agitated by their continued entanglement.* ***Couldn't Basil just stop him already?***

*...*

*Maybe none of that mattered. Basil was enjoying this too. He was squirming and whimpering and gasping with even the slightest touch. It couldn't be more obvious how starved for affection they'd both become.*

*If Basil was trying to act as if this encounter was one-sided, then he was doing a terrible job.*

*...*

*Even if it only stemmed from the depths of his own insecurity, Sunny still decided to put an end to their little game. Basil couldn't pretend as if he didn't want this. Sunny wouldn't let him.*

*Sunny would prove that Basil wanted forgiveness just as much as he did. He'd pry the truth out of Basil's mouth using his own tongue.*

*Basil would never be able to escape from the kind of all-consuming love that Sunny would crush him with.*

*No more guilt.*

*No more lies.*

*No more feeling bad.*

*Sunny would put an end to every bit of it.*

*The last of Sunny's restraint slowly begins to uncurl itself. The younger boy reaches down,* ***and slides a wandering hand under Basil's shirt****. Basil only flinches.*

***Sunny's claw begins to slowly climb its way up Basil's abdomen.*** *The feeling of Basil's skin under his palm fills Sunny with an indescribable sense of power.*

...

But Sunny's hand stops almost immediately. Something was wrong.

*Sunny mind is immediately assaulted by a new, striking feeling. A feeling that he doesn't want.*

*As Sunny's hand pauses its upward ascent on Basil's ribcage, a distinct sense of déjà vu crawls into the boy's head.*

***Déjà vu****. The feeling of something impossibly, inescapably familiar.*

**Familiar?**

How could **THIS** feel familiar?

***Sunny begins to panic. He'd lost something important. He just kept on forgetting.***

**It's all he ever did. Over and over and over again.**

**FORGETTING.**

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"Sunny?" Basil asked again.

"It's... I'm sorry." Sunny stutters. ***"I'm sorry, okay?"***

*Basil's brows knit in obvious confusion. He doesn't know what Sunny is talking about.*

**Sunny quickly retracts his wandering hand. He sits his body upright and looks down at Basil with a lingering feeling of horror.**

**That's enough. Sunny wants to stop now.**

**Sunny stared down at Basil. The blonde's hair was a mess, and his face was flushed. The tears on his face had finally begun to dry, but the expression on his face was growing increasingly afraid. Sunny's influence visibly lingered all over him.**

***Sunny wants to stop now.***

*Basil pushed himself upwards slightly, he remained pinned beneath Sunny but attempted to get a better look at his face.*

*Basil's concerned gaze picked him apart. Sunny tried to resist the impulse to run and hide.*

"I just couldn't... w-we should have-"

**Sunny pitifully tries and fails to come up with a reason to escape from their sudden display of affection. He needs a lie that will spare both his friend's feelings and his own.**

"It's... t-there's..."

**Sunny's throat began to constrict. Someone was choking him. He could feel hands squeezing at the sides of his neck.**

"Sunny-"

**Sunny's eyes suddenly darted to the opposite end of the room. He felt like they were being watched. Someone had probably just seen everything, and was going to burst through the door punish them both for it.**

"**Basil**! W-We have t-to..."

*Basil leaned upwards and placed a finger on Sunny's lips, silencing him. The blonde seemed to continue inspecting him for a few more moments.*

...

"Sunny... just lie down with me, okay?"

*Basil pat the bed beside him once again. Sunny felt the twisting inside of his head begin to loosen slightly.*

*Sunny crawled off of Basil. The blonde grabbed his arm and gently dragged him back towards the mattress. Sunny returned to the other boy's side and began to lay down.*

*Basil removed one of the pillows from behind him and set it behind Sunny's head so that his friend would not have to crawl back across the bed and fetch one of his own. The blonde then rotated and laid on his side so that the two could face each other.*

*Sunny was worried that Basil was going to kiss him again, but his companion only smiled.*

"Does that feel alright?" Basil asked.

"Yeah..." Sunny confirmed.

...

"Stay right there, okay?"

Basil finally descended from the side of the bed and fetched the first aid kit from the floor beneath them. Basil turned the lamp back on, and crawled over to Sunny with the medical supply box jostling in his hands.

Sunny laid perfectly still as Basil played doctor again. The blonde slowly disinfected Sunny's eye, and reapplied the same kind of adhesive bandage as before.

*Sunny's nose wrinkled. The disinfectant smelled bad.*

Basil also slapped a new bandage back on Sunny's forehead, but the patient found that having a new bandage put on hurt far less than having an old bandage removed.

But despite the genuine gratitude he felt while being patched back up again, Sunny also felt more than a bit confused by their sudden change in activity. Basil had instantly swapped back

to what they had been doing before with not a single word spoken about the notable 'event' that had just transpired between them.

But the strangest thing of all was the look on Basil's face. No matter how long Sunny stared at him, Basil just kept smiling. His face was practically beaming, but it seemed as if Basil was trying to hold it in.

Sunny's friend seemed unusually happy, but Sunny himself had no idea why.

Once Sunny was significantly re-bandaged, Basil turned his attention to himself. Basil disinfected his own wound, but he made Sunny hold his hand as he did so. The blonde grit his teeth and winced in pain, but not a single complaint left his lips. Basil simply squeezed Sunny's palm as he slowly concluded his second abdominal examination. Sunny tried to do his best impression of a stress-relief ball.

Basil made Sunny sit back up again so he could briefly disinfect the cut on his shoulder, but it was mutually decided that re-bandaging it would not be necessary. The cut was almost closed, anyway.

Basil set the first aid kit back on the floor and flicked the lamp off once more. The blonde asked if Sunny wanted any of the liquid painkiller, but Sunny cringed slightly at the thought and subsequently declined Basil's offer.

Sunny thought that Basil might end up taking more of the drug himself, but his friend completely ignored it this time. Basil set the bottle somewhere off to his side, discarded.

*Basil laid beside Sunny once again, and slowly pulled Sunny back down into position. Sunny's head hit the pillow. The pair lingered on their sides and gazed at each other in silence.*

*Sunny didn't know what he was supposed to say, so he just kept on saying nothing. Basil only continued smiling at him.*

*Sunny almost wished that he would stop. Almost.*

...

*Basil moved a hand slightly towards him, but then stopped halfway. Sunny hesitantly reached out and took it. Basil intertwined their fingers.*

...

*It was then that Sunny knew. To Sunny's disbelief, his lost friend still granted him pardon. If he was tired, hurt and scared… Basil would see it… and allow it.*

*Sunny stared at Basil once again. No matter how tired the blonde's face became, or how many tireless droplets rolled down from the corners of his eyes, that terrible beauty had never diminished.*

I forgive you.

*Basil didn't say it again, but Sunny could feel it nonetheless.*

*And, as if on que, something within Sunny's body suddenly untangled itself. Something inside of him unfolded and grew loose.*

*It was like taking off a rope that had been bound around his head. Sunny suddenly felt as though he had been physically freed from some unknown binding.*

*And in achieving that freedom, Sunny began to feel other sensations within himself that he had been trying to ignore.*

*Sunny's head hurt. He knew that perfectly well, but it wasn't until just now that he felt like that pain truly... **belonged** to him.*

*Sunny blinked, and felt his eyes water in response to a newfound surge of suffering.*

*Had his head really been buzzing with such an irrepressible pain for so long? Is that really what it had felt like this entire time?*

...

*Was he even... **allowed** to feel how much it hurt?*

*Was it really okay? Was it okay for him to suffer like everyone else? Would he be punished for it?*

*...*

*Basil continued smiling at him.*

*...*

*Maybe everything in Sunny's life could have been different. Maybe if he had been stronger back then, he could have held in his pain in that moment, and spared his sister from that sudden outburst of anger.*

*Maybe, in a different life, him and Mari would have grown up together. Maybe the recital would have simply come and gone, subsequently fading into memories so old that neither could even remember it. Maybe her and Sunny would have stayed friends with everyone else for longer than he could have even imagined.*

*Maybe if that was the path which Sunny had travelled down, then neither him or Basil would have ever hurt each other in the first place, and the both of them would never have ended up in this horrible place. Maybe they would have simply remained the way that they were before, and enjoyed those precious days they shared with their friends even into everyone's teenage years. Maybe they would have gone to high school together and beyond.*

*Sunny's mother had always told him that a lot in life changed during high school. Maybe Sunny would have watched amazing and impressive new people enter their lives and take an interest in his friends.*

*Maybe those new people would have been able to finally convince Basil to see himself in the way which Sunny had always seen him. Maybe then Basil would have realized how special he was all along.*

*Maybe Basil would have finally come to understand that someone like him could have spent his time alongside people far smarter and kinder and better than Sunny was.*

*Maybe Sunny would have never realized or confessed the kinds of feelings he had, because he would have continued believing that the magic creature in the garden was forever out of his reach.*

*But that wasn't the world which he lived in. Sunny had done all of the evil things he wished he hadn't, and each of those unforgivable choices had led him to the exact world he occupied now, in this one, inexplicable moment.*

*Human or not, Sunny really was a monstrous creature. He had stained his hands with a blood which he could never hope to scrub, scrape, scratch, bleach or burn off.*

*And yet, somehow, beneath those guilty hands was the one thing that Sunny wanted more than anything.* ***Basil****.*

*And in spite of his countless despicable evils, Basil still continued smiling at him. Basil gently squeezed his hand.*

...

*In the end, Sunny could finally feel the last of his strange sickness take root. Something vile slowly germinated inside of him.*

*"Psst...* Sunny." Basil whispered. "I have s-something I've been meaning to tell you, okay?"

"Y-Yeah?"

"Do you promise not to laugh?"

"I promise."

*Sunny knows that he's as sorry now as he ever will be. He's sorry and guilty and pathetic and desperate and sad. He hates himself, and his empty, twisted desires make him wish he was dead.*

*But Sunny still can't help but let the thought slip into his mind.*

*He can't help but think for a single impossible, unspeakable moment…*

"I love you."

***Maybe it was all worth it.***

# Welcome Back

...

...

...

"Someone's been having fun."

*A small voice spoke.*

*Sunny blankly stares into a pitch-black nothingness. Sunny was sure that he'd just opened his eyelids, but all he sees is complete darkness.*

*Deep, inescapable blackness. Too dark to be a night sky or bedroom ceiling.*

The dreamer sits up and finds himself on the far end of a black square with a faintly-glowing white outline. As he sits upright, a variety of familiar objects quickly come into view. An assortment of well-used objects which Sunny had strongly hoped to never see again.

On the opposite side of his glowing outline, Sunny's empty reflection stared back at him. Omori awkwardly sat with his arms around his shins and his tilted head resting upon his knees. The puppet's lifeless expression somehow seemed even more dead than his creator had remembered.

*But that pale face was not entirely devoid of emotion. Sunny's monochromatic clone looked painfully bored, as if he had been waiting alone in this room for ages.*

A wave of nauseating confusion immediately washed over Sunny as he continued staring at his counterpart in shocked silence. Omori's two worn-out little pupils lazily inspected him with an aura of tired indifference.

*Sunny doesn't understand what was happening. This place was gone. He hadn't returned to his white room a single time since the truth came out, and had thereby assumed that all of his glorious and hideous dreamscapes had finally vanished into nothingness. He'd finally let it all go.*

Most of his new dreams had been relatively disinteresting. Seemingly none of the vivid dreamscapes he'd possessed in the past had remained inside his head.

But it made sense for it to be that way, didn't it? All of his colorful delusions should have faded into oblivion the moment Sunny had accepted what he did, because he himself could no longer be a part of them.

But this place was unmistakable. Besides the violin which now quietly laid on the ground between Omori and himself, nothing had changed at all.

He sat on the floor in Black Space. Sunny spent a few moments in silence while he tried to come to terms with that fact.

...

*But he couldn't.*

...

*Sunny finally broke eye contact with himself. He lowered his gaze to the endless darkness beneath him, and felt a soft, miserable exhale leave his nose.*

*Had he really... done something wrong?*

...

*He must have.* If he had ended up back in a place like this, then that must have meant that something inside of Sunny was missing. He must have thrown away something important all over again.

And yet, as Sunny rotated his neck to observe his surroundings, an obvious change slowly dawned on him. Something in the blackness **was** missing, but not in the way that he was expecting.

*The faintly-glowing doors were all gone. None leaking white, none leaking red. None at all.*

"Where did it all go?" Sunny asked himself. Omori shrugged and said nothing.

...

Sunny tries to shake himself out of it. He stands up and stares once more into the endless black void which loomed above his head. Sunny squinted as much as he possibly could as he peered intently into darkness. He was hoping to see the faint white outline of anything he might have missed moments ago.

*But not a single inch of wire remained visible. There was nothing.*

*No wire, no bulb. No unthinkable ideas lingering silently within this hidden place.*

Sunny was hoping that the depths of his labyrinthine subconscious might have held some repressed detail of how him and Basil had ended up in the situation they did, but that did not appear to be the case. If there was anything in here which Sunny could not bring himself to remember, it had not been forcibly hidden away... *it had truly been forgotten.*

*There were no more neglected memories hidden here. All which was previously hidden had already been revealed.*

Was that... *good?*

...

*Sunny didn't have time for this.* If this place held no secrets, then he was not going to remain here any longer than he had to. He was not interested in drowning himself in pointless self-hatred anymore. Part of Sunny felt rather unsettled by the fact that he had awoken into a black room rather than a white one, but speculating on such changes was far beyond his current interest. He had **much** better things to do.

*None of this was real. Time to leave.*

*Sunny turned his gaze back to the floor. He inspected his belongings which had been left on the ground, lifting the violin slightly to see if there was anything hiding underneath it. However, he did not find-*

"Are you just going to keep ignoring him?"

*Sunny turned his gaze back to Omori.*

"... Ignore?" Sunny mirrored in confusion.

The younger boy's brow tilted slightly as his head turned. Omori finally broke focus from his creator and peered into the darkness on Sunny's right.

Sunny's gaze moved with him, but he failed to notice anything at first. The black-haired dreamer looked back into the empty shadows and tried to make out whatever it was that his counterpart was staring-

*Sunny's eye widens in horror as he catches sight of another pair of eyes watching him... and another... **and another.** Each of those wide-eyed little creatures gazed at him with silent, breathless fascination. The longer Sunny stares back, the more pairs of leering eyes he notices lingering on him from the shadows.*

***They're everywhere.***

***Sunny is terrified.*** *He immediately turns around and tries to run in the opposite direction, but he barely manages to take two steps before his true position finally dawns on him.*

*Eyes were watching from behind him, too. In the distance, a congregation of faintly-glowing white orbs picked him apart with anxious curiosity.*

*Sunny was surrounded on all sides. They were crowding around to watch the display.*

*A dozen nightmarish outlines of Basil stare at Sunny from the shadows as if waiting with baited breath for whatever his next action might be. Sunny swallowed.*

*In prior dreams, most of the shadowy strangers had never particularly paid him or his pale shell much mind. After all, why would they? Sunny could never remember anything regarding their twisted little secrets or tireless words of pity. Seemingly bored by Sunny's constant inaction, they had taken to aimlessly wandering about the darkness just as he did.*

*Sunny never came down here for them. He only ever came down for Basil. A part of Basil that he could still recognize.*

So Sunny largely ignored the strangers and their ugly words. Most of the time, they were a background detail to him at best. Nothing more than another pointless, unnecessary aspect of his extensive dream world which Sunny would fail to remember at all once he'd awoken.

But those darkened forms no longer treated Sunny with the same dreadful pity or restless indifference which they once did. Maybe that was because Sunny had finally stopped hiding himself from them. They could all see him now, as he really was. *Through excruciating effort, the dreamer's cold shell had been both cast off and accepted.*

**But that shell seemingly still lingered here.** Omori stared at Sunny right alongside the rest of them, the tiny beginnings of a sadistic smirk tugging at the edge of lip. Sunny's reflection seemed to derive some minuscule hint of satisfaction from his creator's obvious fear.

Sunny fell to the ground in a panic while violently whipping his head back and forth, only to find more and more blackened forms gazing at him the longer he scrambled across the floor.

But to his surprise, most of the strangers drew away slightly. Each of them reflected Sunny's sudden fear back at him.

...

*Sunny felt himself calm down a little. His panic lessened somewhat. The strange forms seemed reluctant to come any closer. They all stared at Sunny as if unsure that moving towards him was truly safe.*

*Sunny regained his breath. None of the shades which surrounded him dared to move an inch.*

...

"H-Hello."

*Sunny spoke to the crowd which surrounded him. Some of the strangers seemed surprised by that fact, and appeared to discuss it amongst themselves. A few turned to each other and spoke in hushed voices which were largely beyond the boy's reach.*

*"...dreamer..."*

*"...forgotten..."*

*"...flower..."*

*"...returned..."*

*Sunny felt a surge of anxiety in response to their continued interest. He turned to face his reflection, but Omori provided no commentary. All prior amusement or interest had faded from his pale face. The puppet let out a tiny yawn and absentmindedly stretched his legs.*

Suddenly, the voices from the shadows finally began to die down. Sunny took note of a lone figure that had been lingering in the distance behind Omori. Sunny watched with baited breath as that particular shadow began to draw closer with very slow and deliberate steps. The heads of the other strangers turned in unison.

Omori glanced up slightly as the final outline of Basil slowly entered the glowing square and passed him by. The blackened figure cautiously bent down and sat on the floor in front of Sunny, briefly glancing down at the abandoned violin as he did so.

*The figure turned back to stare at him. Sunny tried to speak, but nothing came to his mind. He remained motionless.*

"Sunny."

*The outline of Basil spoke.*

"Thank you."

*Huh?*

"For not running away. For coming back." It clarified.

"..."

"I was so tired and alone... for so, so long..."

*Sunny listened silently as the shade continued speaking in a gentle, melancholic tone.*

"I'd given up hope. I never thought that you would... would..."

*Sunny's expression shifted to one of slight confusion as he watched Basil begin to struggle. The shadow held its hands together as if gripping something tightly, but Sunny couldn't tell what it was.*

...

"S-So please..."

*Basil's shoulders began to shake gently.*

*"Don't hate me..."*

*Sunny felt his his throat tighten.* ***This again? What did that even mean?***

*The dreamer watched as the fragment of his friend continued trembling in silence.*

...

"I won't." Sunny promised.

*The shadow turned downwards.*

"T-Thank you."

The outline of Basil kept its head tilted downwards, but lifted its eyes to look at Sunny regardless. It only glanced for a brief moment before turning away again, raising its arm in front of its face slightly as if attempting to obscure Sunny's view of it.

...

*The dreamer's own face heated up. Sunny suddenly felt excruciatingly embarrassed, but wasn't even sure why.*

The shadow stood and quickly backed away again, seemingly attempting to fade into the darkness behind Omori while softly shaking with some mixture of sorrow or embarrassment.

...

Omori watched the figure back away before turning his gaze to Sunny once more. Sunny stared at his younger form in unison.

The crowd watched them both as if expecting something more to happen... *but Sunny wasn't sure what he was supposed to do, so he just continued awkwardly staring at Omori. Omori stared back.*

...

After a few more moments of silence, Omori finally rolled his eyes and kicked a small metal object across the floor to his creator. The steak knife quietly clattered against the solid darkness as it bounced towards Sunny. His old blade came to a final stop right in front of him.

Sunny reached out his hand to take it. He picked up the blade and felt himself swallow slightly. This was what he was looking for, but something about holding it as *himself* made the weapon feel far more **tangible** than it usually did.

...

*The strangers surrounding the pair finally seemed to lose interest. They mumbled a bit more before beginning to move away. It appeared as if they had no lingering desire to watch Sunny shank himself. The show had concluded for now.*

...

Sunny was left alone with his clone once more.

The dreamer nervously rotated the blade in his hands. He prepared to press it into his stomach before hesitating slightly.

Sunny glanced at the younger boy one last time. He felt as if there was something he might have needed to say to himself... *for some reason.*

*But Omori didn't look as if he wanted to have another quick hug, or a friendly chat. If anything, he appeared slightly annoyed.*

...

"... Bye."

*Sunny said goodbye to himself. Omori didn't reply.*

*The dreamer finally steeled his nerves and pressed the blade into his stomach. He felt blood begin to pool on the floor as usual, but there was no pain.*

*Sunny felt himself start to fade away from this dreams, but not before hearing a small voice speak to him one last time.*

"It's still right down the hall. Hurry up and remember already."

***Hall?***

---

*Sunny opened his eyelids, and awakened into a cold hell once more. The sun had not yet risen. It was now the middle of the night.*

*Most of his previous awakenings had startled him somewhat, but Sunny had largely gotten used to waking up in here by this point. No matter how horrible some of his waking circumstances might've been, they always had a way of becoming surprisingly disinteresting.*

*But maybe the real reason it wasn't scary anymore was simply that Sunny wasn't* ***alone*** *anymore. Despite the horror of their current circumstances, Sunny began to feel a surge of quiet confidence run through his veins. He was less afraid of the future now than he had ever been in his entire life. Sunny didn't need to be afraid anymore, because him and Basil could get through anything together. After all of their countless, pointless struggles... the two of them had finally proven that was the truth.*

*Maybe Sunny and his friend really were cursed. Maybe the reason all these horrible things happened to them was because the universe itself was hell-bent on punishing them for their continued sickness.*

*But it didn't matter. Sunny didn't care. He'd drag Basil straight out of hell no matter how many times god shoved him back down again.*

*No matter what happened, no matter where they ended up, Sunny would never let him go.*

*Sunny turned to view the still-sleeping shape of his partner, and felt his heart stop completely. The form he expected was nowhere to be found.*

*Basil was not in this room.*

# Her Final Trip Comes to an End

Chapter Notes

Hello

I'm just posting this so that the people who keep checking in know that I'm not dead yet. My life has been excruciatingly difficult the last few months, and there has been little spare time for writing.

But here's an Aubrey chapter, if you'd like.

*Rain battered the side of the vehicle as Aubrey and her friends drove through the foothills.*

"We got lucky that this didn't happen earlier, to be honest." Hero thought aloud.

*Swirling torrents of water melted clumps of ice from the cliff-faces around them and deposited that frozen liquid and debris directly onto the roadway which they were attempting to pass through. It hardly seemed like a notable issue right now, but Aubrey had to empathize with Hero's slight discomfort. The current weather was far from ideal for driving, and it appeared to steadily be growing worse.*

"I think it looks really cool." Kel pressed his face up against the passenger's-side door.

"Cool to look at." Hero agreed. "Much less cool to drive in."

*The road ahead was filled with moving water. Hero nervously scratched at the side of his face, appearing to reconsider their current options.*

"Yeah… I'm not risking it." He decided. "This isn't even our car, after all."

"That's fair." Aubrey agreed.

"So are we just going to go all the way back the way we came?" Kel inquired. "Is there even anything out there?"

Hero shook his head. "No, I think I'll just park us here for a bit." He stated. "It might clear up soon."

Kel stretched himself out in his seat. "Sounds good to me. Nothing wrong with a little.... down... time..." Hero's brother yawned.

*Aubrey noticed that the cabin of the vehicle suddenly felt very quiet despite the rain storming outside. Kel had completely stopped moving.*

...

"He did not." Aubrey muttered.

"He did." Hero smirked.

*"THAT fast?"*

"Kel has always been like that. I wish I had his skill." Hero joked.

*A soft snore began to emanate from Kel's gaping mouth, but the sound of his breath was barely audible through the pounding rain.*

"Well, at least its harder to hear him this time." Aubrey mumbled.

...

Aubrey and Hero sat in the car as they watched storm clouds slowly pass overhead. As time went on, the rain grew a little louder and the sunlight began to dim.

Nevertheless, the effect of the water on the world around them was still fascinating to watch. An ungodly amount of mud passed down the slope ahead of them. The sparse trees on both sides swayed back and forth in the wind, ruffling as they silently attempted to remain in place through the minor storm.

A tiny river of pebbles travelled just under the car. If Aubrey were to lean forward and look straight down, then she could see the water moving through little channels in the asphalt, stealing bits and pieces of the world and washing them away.

The rain was slowly reclaiming everything and moving it somewhere down the mountain. Aubrey hadn't really taken notice of how high up they'd become until just now. It didn't feel

as if they'd ascended very much considering how much more the surrounding land still continued climbing over their heads, but from this one patch of road you could see far downwards and into the distance. Aubrey gazed out at the tiny flood ahead of them, trying to make out exactly where all this water was going to end up once it had made its descent.

…

***Aubrey jumped in her seat as a random person suddenly walked up to the side of the car.***

Or at least Aubrey had thought it was a person from the edge of her peripheral vision. But upon rotating her head, it was revealed to her that the large form she'd noticed was actually just a deer.

Or, to be more specific, a whole assortment of deer. The sudden mob of hooved beasts descended from the trees above them and began to slowly walk around the back of the car. Aubrey watched in shock as the herd pushed on through the pouring rain, seemingly paying no mind to the vehicle itself (or its occupants).

"Psst! Hero!" Aubrey whispered.

"Yeah?" Hero mumbled.

"Turn around!"

"Why d- *Oh*..."

Hero trailed off as the two of them began to observe the deer parading together. All the animals began to cluster together more closely as if regrouping from the minor dispersal they'd suffered while descending the mountainside.

"I can't believe they don't notice us." Aubrey whispered as a doe passed directly by the passenger-side door.

Aubrey noticed that the herd had rotated upon hitting the road, their leader seemingly choosing to move parallel to the vehicle instead of continuing downwards through the forest. Now the animals were all passing towards the current itself. Aubrey and Hero held their tongues as the deer all passed directly by the vehicle and crept into the road ahead.

The deer got a little closer to the water, but they all ended up stopping just as Hero did. A few of them bent down as if to test the river ahead, but none appeared particularly keen on attempting to cross it. Some of the deer actually sat down in the grass beside the car, seemingly unconcerned by the pouring rain overhead.

Hero let out a quiet chuckle. "Well, isn't that something. Should we wake Kel up?"

"No way." Aubrey mumbled. "He'd get too loud and scare them away."

Hero and Aubrey watched quietly as one deer in particular ended up drawing attention to itself. It was just a small buck. The animal wouldn't have usually stood out much from its associates, but there was a single minor difference present in its appearance. One of its antlers was missing.

"Look." Aubrey noted. "It's missing one."

"Yeah." Hero agreed.

...

*Neither spoke anymore. Aubrey and her friend sat in silence until the rain had finally died down, and watched with wonder as the deer actually began to cross the current ahead of them. The lopsided buck turned back to look behind the herd one last time before jumping in, but if any of them had noticed the humans inside the vehicle then they had remained entirely disinterested in their primate observers.*

---

*The rain having stopped and the current having stilled, Hero eventually decided that it was safe to start driving again.*

*Aubrey watched the shadowy limbs of the trees pass by as the world around her teetered on the verge of night. The thick mat of clouds overhead only made the growing darkness seem more impatient to swallow this side of the planet once again. Aubrey's surroundings were soaked in tired shades of dark grey and blue, all of which emanated a feeling of gentle gloom that made her eyelids seem heavy.*

*It had only been a single day, but Aubrey felt she had done more and seen more in the last 24 hours than she had in the last year combined. The feeling was almost overwhelming.*

*Cliff faces and caves and hot springs were all both visited and photographed. Aubrey had been astonished by the size of the city, but somehow the scale of the natural world itself was*

*even more mind-boggling.*

*The constant sense of novelty kept Aubrey's attention in place, but their pace was unbelievably quick. It felt as if the three of them were fast-forwarding through a vacation; Aubrey and her friends skipping ahead as much as possible to see all the best parts.*

*It was easy to understand why. None of them had infinite time to be out here, all of them had obligations to return to, neither of their families would likely be thrilled about the trio's sudden vanishing act, and the whole motivation behind their trip was... a bit amorphous, to say the least.*

*As much fun as some of it had been, their entire excursion was still defined by a looming sense of misery and uncertainty.*

*As well as a general lack of funding. Aubrey hadn't vocalized it herself, but she'd been wondering if Hero really had the disposable cash to be taking the three of them to all of these strange places. He was still just a college student, after all. It seemed very unlikely to her that the money he'd spent so far wouldn't have been better exchanged elsewhere.*

*But since this whole trip was technically his idea (and Hero had always been the most responsible in the group), Aubrey decided to trust that the older boy knew what he was doing. If Hero wasn't going to make a big deal out of their finances, then Aubrey wouldn't make a big deal of it, either. It wasn't her business. From Aubrey's perspective, Kel's brother seemed distracted enough as it was.*

*But despite their unfortunate circumstances, Aubrey kept catching Hero smiling. Laughing. There was something missing from his eyes, but Aubrey still hoped that at least a fraction of his enjoyment was genuine. She wondered if he'd managed to find even a hint of whatever it was that he came out here looking for. If not closure, maybe.... something else, at the very least.*

*As for herself...*

*Aubrey stared at her quiet reflection in the passenger's-side window. She kept searching her own expression for some emotion that she felt was missing... but whatever feeling that might have been, she could not find it.*

*...*

*Maybe it didn't matter anymore.*

Aubrey opened her eyes and found herself cloaked in blackness. She was still in the passenger's-side seat of the car, but night had finally fallen. Their vehicle wasn't moving anymore, and the headlights were off. They were parked by the side of the road, hidden somewhere quiet and surrounded by trees. It took Aubrey a few moments to even remember where she was or what was happening.

Aubrey peered into the darkness in front of the car before a chill ran down her spine. She came to the sudden realization that someone was standing a few feet ahead of them, vacantly staring into the shadows. Aubrey's lungs momentarily tightened in fear before she finally recognized that the strange figure was just Hero. The driver's seat beside her was empty. It was no wonder that the vehicle wasn't moving. Their pilot had ejected himself.

Aubrey took a second to compose herself again before turning around to take a peek into the backseat. Kel was sprawled out across both chairs, napping in a position that made Aubrey's neck hurt just to look at.

*Aubrey itched at the back of her hand. Kel was sleeping quietly this time, at the very least.*

Aubrey slowly and silently opened her door before stepping outside into a bizarrely-cold summer night. She folded her arms over each other, trying to keep hints of her previous warmth from escaping with the breeze. Aubrey quietly approached the figure in the distance.

"Hero? Are you okay?" She asked.

Hero jumped slightly at the sound of her voice, seemingly unaware of Aubrey's sudden approach. He let out a brief chuckle and scratched the back of his head. "Haha... you scared me, there."

"What's going on?" Aubrey inquired.

"I was heading back towards town... but after the two of you fell asleep, I started to feel like I might have been nodding off again myself." Hero admitted. "So I decided to park for a moment just to play it safe. Wouldn't want a repeat of last time."

"Oh. Yeah, that’s true." Aubrey confirmed.

"Sorry I didn't get us back to civilization yet." Hero apologized. "We should all really be in bed by now."

"Hero... if you're tired, why didn't you stay in the car and rest with us?" Aubrey inquired.

Hero hesitated. "I dunno… I just felt like maybe I needed a little fresh air."

"Something on your mind?"

...

"Some*one."*

*Aubrey nodded and exhaled through her nose. The two of them stared out into the darkened forest ahead of them. Aubrey felt as if she should have been more afraid while she was staring into the shadowy depths of a pitch-black forest, but the fear she anticipated never seemed to arise within her. Even if a terrible shape were to suddenly lunge out at her from the darkness, Aubrey wasn't sure if she'd care at all. If anything, it felt as though she were just waiting for it to happen.*

*The breeze bristled through the trees, causing them to shift and sway in a hypnotic motion. Something about watching the outline of the branches drifting back and forth against the night sky was especially striking to Aubrey.*

"It's really beautiful out here." She remarked.

*"Yeah."* Hero agreed. "It really is."

...

"Did you find any of it?" Aubrey asked. "Any of... whatever it was you wanted to find out here?"

"A little." Hero confirmed. “I’m happy I went, at least.”

"..."

"..."

"Are you going to be okay once we go home?" Aubrey asked.

"Yeah, don't worry about me. I'll be fine." Hero confirmed with a grin.

...

*But that smile died out fast.*

...

"Aubrey."

"Hm?"

"Once I'm gone again, will you keep an eye on Kel for me?" Hero asked.

Aubrey felt her nose wrinkle. "Do I have to?"

*Hero smirked in the shadows.*

...

"I know it doesn't seem like it... but Kel isn't invincible. I know all of this has bothered him a lot more than he lets on."

...

"I'll... *keep in touch."* Aubrey reassured Hero. "But I don't really know what exactly it is you expect me to do about him."

"..."

"You know how it gets when we're stuck alone together." Aubrey underlined.

Hero smirked. "That's what I'm counting on. I know that you'll keep him... *himself."*

"What an honor." Aubrey sneered.

"It's not too much to ask, is it?" Hero scratched his head.

Aubrey shrugged and felt her face heat up slightly. "I'll manage."

"Thanks, Aubrey."

...

"It really has been good seeing you again." Hero remarked.

"Oh, uh... *you too."* Aubrey itched at her wrist, feeling slightly embarrassed.

Hero let out a sad smile. "It's funny... I hadn't even realized how much I'd missed you until I saw you again."

*Hero hesitated for a moment.*

"…"

"I felt the same way about Sunny."

"..."

"It's strange to think... if Kel hadn't gotten him out of his house that day, then none of us would be out here." He mused.

...

"We still wouldn't have known anything." Aubrey thought aloud.

"Do you think that would that have been better?" Hero questioned.

"No. I don't think so." Aubrey shook her head.

"I agree."

*Aubrey and Hero continued watching the wind run its fingers through the tops of the trees, gently agitating them with an invisible, unstoppable motion. The trees endured their constant pushing and pulling, because weathering through it was all they could do.*

*A sudden feeling arose within Aubrey that she did not immediately recognize. It was something pleasant and familiar, but undeniably sad.*

*Or maybe it was the familiarity itself that felt sad? She wasn't entirely sure.*

*Regardless, Aubrey focused on the sensation of the breeze passing through her hair. It was a bit colder than she'd initially thought it was, but the feeling remained pleasant nonetheless. For just a moment, Aubrey felt like a child again.*

*A confused kid in a confusing place, that still felt safe because she at least knew she wasn't alone.*

*For a moment, Aubrey remained lost... but not lost by herself.*

"Aubrey." Hero spoke. His voice was soft.

"Hm?"

"I know this is really selfish of me, but..." He trailed off.

...

"I can't lose any more friends, okay?" He stated.

*Aubrey silently thumbed at the bandage wrapped around her arm. Her cut was healing just fine, but the cold air made it ache slightly.*

"Okay." She agreed.

*Aubrey felt a lump growing in her throat.*

*"I'm s-sorry."* She whispered, her voice cracking slightly.

Hero placed his arm around Aubrey's shoulder. He gently pulled her body to the side, and Aubrey rotated just in time to fall into the older boy's hug. Aubrey felt the tension in her head evaporate into a fuzzy feeling of embarrassment.

Aubrey enjoyed the familiar, nostalgic comfort for a few more moments before finally deciding that continuing any longer would be a little ***too*** embarrassing. They were both basically adults now, after all. Not that Hero seemed particularly bothered.

Aubrey was just about to move away when a second pair of arms suddenly pinned her in from behind. She considered telling Kel to get the hell off, but she probably wouldn't have been able to strike the right tone.

"I can't believe you guys were just going to hug out here without me." Hero's brother complained, smirking. "Talking about some serious stuff or what?"

"Shut up. It's none of your business."

---

*The three of them ended up spending the entire night parked by the side of the road. Hero had promised that he would take them back into town after he rested his eyes, but Kel's brother simply ended up falling asleep himself. Neither of his two passengers minded, so the remaining pair decided to let Hero get the rest that he clearly needed. Everyone ended up passing out eventually. Aubrey awoke to the feeling of the sun poking out at them from between the trees, and slowly came to the realization that she couldn't remember the last time she'd seen a forest so early in the morning. The eager beams of morning light gently passed through the branches and dappled the ground by the side of the road.*

*Aubrey and the brothers both exited the car to stretch their legs. After a few minutes spent waking up, the three of them ended up absentmindedly parading amongst the trees for no particular reason. It was nice to go for a short walk. Aubrey spent a few minutes wondering if they would get in trouble for leaving their vehicle where they did. Kel told her not to worry about it. Hero didn't even appear to be listening.*

*Aubrey was ready to start worrying about their driver again, but Kel promptly dragged his older sibling into some kind of brotherly competition that seemed to snap Hero out of it. Aubrey wasn't entirely sure what it even was that they had both begun challenging each other over, but the pair appeared to be having fun with their childish game. The three of them continued sauntering through the woods as they talked.*

*Aubrey caught herself laughing more often than she cared to admit.*

---

"Eww, is it dead?" Kel asked.

"It's not dead. It's sleeping." Hero smirked.

"How can you tell?"

Aubrey watched with a vague sense of amusement as her friends loomed over the motionless form of a large snake. The two brothers had been flipping rocks over as the three of them drifted across the forest floor, and their latest mineral victim had been briefly concealing a sizable serpent which they'd found coiled underneath. The newly-unveiled reptile showed no exterior signs of injury, but it had not moved at all in response to its sudden intruders. The snake was laying so perfectly still that Aubrey almost would have believed that it was fake had they found it hiding anywhere else.

"Most reptiles go into a temporary state of reduced activity when there's an unexpected drop in temperature. It’s kind of like hibernating. Their blood barely moves, but because their bodies require less oxygen their tissues are preserved." Hero stated. Aubrey raised her eyebrows.

"So once it warms up it will start moving again?" Kel inquired.

"One way to find out." Hero grinned.

Aubrey felt a chill run down her spine as Hero slowly reached down and picked up the footlong snake as if he was gently lifting a stuffed animal. The circle of snake still seemed motionless, but Aubrey could have sworn that she saw its head turn slightly.

"Uh... *Hero?"* Aubrey stared.

"Don't worry about it." Hero reassured her.

Kel laughed as Hero carried the snake a few feet away and placed it on a flat stone that had been lucky enough to receive a singular ray of light from the rising sun. Hero stepped back and regrouped with his friends before turning around to view the snake again. Aubrey stared at the serpent as if it were a bomb that had been set to go off.

*But despite the growing anticipation from the snake’s audience, nothing was happening.*

...

"It's not doing anything." Kel noted.

"Just give it a minute." Hero reassured him. Aubrey pushed a stray hair out of her face.

*Surely enough, after a few more seconds spent in silence, Aubrey witnessed the snake's neck lift slightly. The serpent's body loosened as if decompressing. The animal finally twisted its head all the way to the side and flicked its tongue through the air, seemingly trying to make sense of its unexplained relocation.*

"Wow, it really was alive." Kel remarked.

"Maybe you should be a veterinarian instead of a doctor, Hero." Aubrey suggested.

Hero scratched the side of his face. "I don't think all the snakes a vet sees would be nearly as relaxed as this one." He remarked.

"Yeah, and besides... what if someone asked Hero to take care of a tarantula?" Kel joked.

"Very funny."

*Aubrey initially thought that the snake might have taken issue with its sudden change in scenery, but after a moment the reptile lowered its head back to the stone and flattened its body out as if to make itself wider for the sun's rays. If it was actually going to leave its new seat, it didn't seem like it was in any rush to do so.*

Aubrey kicked a clump of dirt off of her shoe. "Thanks for teaching us your snake science, Hero." She joked.

*"Snience."* Kel dubbed.

Hero smirked. "So are you guys ready to get back on the road?" He asked.

"Sure, if you want to." Aubrey agreed.

"Where are we going next?" Kel asked.

Hero opened his mouth for a moment, but didn't say anything. Aubrey assumed that he was just taking a second to think, but that second turned into two... into three...

...

Hero sighed and scratched the back of his head as he stared further off into the trees. He was still smiling, but there was a vague sense of sadness lingering behind his eyes.

"You good?" Kel questioned his brother.

"We've actually already cleared everything off of Mari's list." Hero stated. "Everything I could possibly afford, anyway."

"Wow, really? In just a day?" Kel remarked, frowning.

"Yeah. You guys move fast, huh?" Hero agreed.

...

"Or maybe Mari just didn't have enough time to fill out her list." He remarked.

...

"So what now?" Kel asked.

"I don't know." Hero admitted.

"Should we head home then?" Kel rubbed his forehead. Aubrey kicked at the dirt again.

...

Hero exhaled. "I'm sorry that I didn't plan any of this out more. I dragged both of you out here and now it feels like we have nothing better to do than go back to Faraway."

"You don't have to keep apologizing all the time, Hero." Aubrey chided. "We're out here because we wanted to be."

"Yeah." Kel agreed.

"Still... I wish there was something more just to... *wrap it all up, I guess."* Hero said. "Maybe we could grab a bite to eat before heading home at least."

"Alright." Kel nodded. "I'm not really hungry yet, though." Hero's brother admitted. Aubrey was shocked to hear those words leave his mouth.

"Me neither." Aubrey seconded.

...

*The conversation died down for a moment. Aubrey listened to the gentle sound of the wind, but then came to the slow realization that there was another tone hiding underneath it.*

"You guys hear that?" Aubrey asked. "Kind of sounds like running water."

"Maybe there's a riverbed down the slope." Hero gazed towards the very slight decrease in elevation as the forest continued onward ahead of them.

"Cool!" Kel beamed. "Do you guys wanna go check it out?"

"Why not." Aubrey stated, scratching her face. *"Hero?"*

Hero smirked. "No reason not to."

Kel took a single step deeper into the woods before suddenly stopping in place.

*"Uh oh."* Hero's brother scratched the back of his head.

"What is it?" Aubrey asked.

*Kel pointed to the now-empty mineral throne, devoid of its newly-appointed serpentine ruler.*

"Did any of you see where the snake went?" Kel thought aloud.

Hero smirked nervously. "Watch where you step."

---

“Everything okay, Aubrey?” Hero inquired. "You've been a bit quiet."

Aubrey flinched slightly at Hero's sudden assessment of her change in behavior. She hadn't even noticed her own silence until Hero had pointed it out directly. The three of them slowly stopped walking.

Aubrey still wasn't entirely sure how Hero could ask about other people's feelings so directly, but that tendency had seemingly been rubbing off on her more and more as their trip went on. A small part of Aubrey wanted to impulsively argue that it wasn't any of his business, but she recognized that impulse was just a matter of habit.

Maybe being honest about what you felt wasn't quite as hard as she'd thought it was. Besides, what could Aubrey possibly say to her friends that would be even half as difficult as what had already been said?

...

“Do you guys mind if I spend a little time by myself?” Aubrey asked. “Before we leave, I mean.”

“No. Of course not.” Hero shook his head. Kel just shrugged.

"Thanks. I just need a little time to think... I think." Aubrey exhaled.

"I'm going to go uphill for a while." She decided. "Meet you guys back at the car in a bit?"

"Just don't go too far." Hero warned.

"And watch for snakes." Kel picked his nose.

Aubrey nodded and started walking back towards the car after Hero threw her the keys. The older boy told her that she could relax in the car if she got back before they did, but Hero made her promise that she wouldn't be gone longer than a half-hour or so. Aubrey stated that she wouldn't wander far and departed from the two brothers, only pausing for a moment once she finally reached the side of the road again.

Aubrey looked both ways before crossing, but the mountain path they were on appeared entirely devoid of human life. Aubrey wondered if no one was out here due to the of the rough, out-of-season weather this place had been receiving. Beautiful as they were, these hills hardly seemed like much of a vacation spot... unless you liked being partially frozen in the middle of summer.

Aubrey paused by the car and unlocked the passenger's-side door, placing the keys on the roof for a moment so that both her hands remained free. She reached inside and pulled her bag towards her, unzipping it to quickly check if she'd even remembered to bring what she was looking for.

After a few moments spent digging around, Aubrey removed a small purple notebook from the bag and re-zipped it. She placed the object under her arm before exiting the vehicle. Aubrey continued her uphill ascent, but the upwards curvature of the rising land was so small on the opposite side of the road that it almost became imperceptible.

Aubrey passed several fallen trees as she worked her way around the various bushes and branches. She paused a few times to look at bugs and birds and even a few mushrooms... but none of it particularly stole her interest. Regardless, it was still incredible to see how different

from Faraway it all was. Aubrey checked and then double-checked the bear spray in her left pocket, just in case.

Aubrey briefly stared at the forest canopy. Mari would definitely have loved the opportunity to set up a picnic somewhere out here. If she stopped to imagine it, Aubrey could almost hear the sound of her voice.

...

The pink-haired girl reached a sudden spike in elevation. Upon climbing to the top, she was left staring down into a small, wooded valley between the hilltop she was on and the even-taller summit ahead of her. There was a tiny fraction of moving water building up at the bottom, but otherwise the miniature valley seemed rather unremarkable.

Aubrey paused for a moment and let the breeze pass through her hair. She took a seat on a fallen log that had gotten itself pinned between a few other trees at the top of the hill, thereby preventing it from rolling down into the depths below. She gazed out into the woodlands ahead of her before finally removing the purple-faced notebook from underneath her arm.

Aubrey let the pages of her diary run across the edge of her thumb, hesitating to lift the cover. She considered for a moment whether or not she even wanted to open it.

The pages contained within had become more than a bit warped and yellowed over the years. The cheap binding holding it all together was also slowly coming apart. Aubrey had wondered if it was even worth bringing such a delicate artifact with her on this trip, but she figured that if she was ever going to write to herself again... now would likely be the time to do so.

Maybe this would be the final time she would. The older she got, the less Aubrey bothered recording her feelings. And so, with every subsequent entry, the time between her writings increased.

Aubrey couldn't stand writing any more, because every passing year made her previous diary entries feel more and more idiotic. Re-reading them to herself now made the entire journal feel less like a compilation of thoughts or experiences and more like a book of bad jokes.

*After all, even if she put pen to paper, what would she really be doing anymore? What more was there left to write? With every additional page filled, the entire record of her life became more and more pointless. It was a collection of idiotic scribblings that had conglomerated together only to form an endless, empty void. She'd held onto it out of some sense of either nostalgia or guilt, but Aubrey already knew that there was nothing inside worth reading.*

*Was there any point in looking at the past at all? Had all the time she'd spent ruminating on what she'd lost been a complete waste?*

...

Then again, maybe it wasn't up to her. Maybe she never had a choice of whether or not to lament the loss of her childhood, and her friends.

Aubrey had to have stored those feelings away somewhere outside herself, or else they probably would have slowly destroyed her. Maybe they still did.

...

*Aubrey turned the object back and forth in her hands, quietly inspecting its tattered edges. She hadn't realized how much she'd abused it over the years.*

*Perhaps, as pointless as they felt to her now... the fragile, yellowed pages contained within this notebook had still protected Aubrey from herself for a very long time.*

...

But things change. What might have worked for her as a child was no longer sufficient. It just wasn't good enough.

Aubrey hadn't written a single word since that day. Learning the truth had recontextualized almost everything that she'd recorded over the past four years, and all of it for the worse. Re-reading her scattered words was somehow even more painful now than it had been back when she'd written them.

Far from dispersing Aubrey's feelings, this book had instead served only to unify them. All of her darkest days, worst memories and shed tears had been conjoined together into a single book.

Back then, the interior of Aubrey's binder had been a sacred place. Her diary was filled with unspeakable confessions which she had made to no one other than herself... but now Aubrey knew that each of those confessions had been made in ignorance. All of the endless self-blame and self-hatred recorded in each page had ultimately originated from a lie. In the end, Aubrey had become a victim of herself. Her past self was nothing more than a child desperately trying to take responsibility for horrors that were never under her control to begin with.

Mari had never even left them at all. If it was Mari's choice, then she would have still taken stage. All of that practicing wasn't for nothing. None of it was given away. It was all **stolen**.

*Mari never killed herself. Sunny killed her.*

*Knowing that, what more was there to be said? What else could Aubrey possibly bother to record in these pages? What was the point?*

*There were not enough empty sheets of paper in the world to record all of the hopeless, pointless dread that Aubrey carried now. No matter how many of those little miseries she scribed away, they would always just grow back again in her next waking moment.*

...

Maybe the reason that Aubrey could never leave those feelings behind was because she didn't actually want to. Maybe she didn't want to because those feelings were the last trace she had left of her. Once those emotions left forever, Mari would be gone forever too. She would finally finish fading away, and all of the time Aubrey had spent sobbing over her departure would finally feel just as pointless as it always had been.

Aubrey would be forced to acknowledge what she already knew. She'd spent a quarter of her life picking at the same wound over and over while drowning herself in an aimless self-pity... and it was all for nothing.

Writing down your feelings helps you process them... and leave them behind. That's what people said, at least. Aubrey thought it was almost funny how it never really felt that way.

...

Aubrey took a breath. She finally opened the notebook, and stared down at the copy of herself which she'd crafted out of ink. Her jet-black reflection was just as miserable as she'd remembered it being.

She flipped from page to page quickly, not bothering to read the entirety of any one document before moving on to the next. Page by page she floated through until finally arriving at a blank sheet. Aubrey's book of suffering was almost full, and yet a dozen or so empty canvases still remained, each surely begging not to be filled.

Aubrey exhaled. It looked as if her story was almost over. She just had to decide how she wanted it to end.

And so, Aubrey's pen was finally pressed against the parchment.

...

But Aubrey found herself incapable of writing anything. Not a single word came to mind. There was simply nothing more Aubrey had to say, even to herself.

...

So, after a brief pause... she tried to think of something she might have wanted to say to someone else instead. Something she never got the chance to.

...

*The pen began to move.*

**I'm sorry I almost killed you**.

*Aubrey stared at the six words which lingered under her hand, and paused to consider whether or not they were still true.*

...

**Was all that stuff that Sunny said really true?**

**I never even asked you about anything. I just took his word for it, I guess. I believed his story and never even stopped to question why. I wanted to believe that it was all a lie,**

**but I couldn't imagine anyone would actually tell a lie like that.**

**But I guess if it wasn't true then you probably wouldn't be gone now, would you?**

...

**On that night, when you wouldn't open your door, I really did want to apolog**

*Aubrey's pen stopped. The ink pooled underneath the 'g' as she stared at the last sentence which was still trying to form. She stopped early, and held her hand over the next line instead, hesitating for a moment as the shadows in her head continued slowly dripping down into her fingers.*

...

*Aubrey started again.*

***You two really did lie about everything, didn't you?***

**Is that why you kept resisting all the time? Why you didn't want to be around me? Was the guilt too much for you? Was that why you ruined all our memories? Why you blacked her out? Did that actually make you feel any better? How could it?**

*The pen stopped for a moment, as if catching its breath. The blackness within Aubrey's pen pooled on the page once more as the hand holding it grew tight and rigid.*

**I keep asking myself what I would have done if you or Sunny had drowned. I don't think I could have lived with myself if I'd been responsible for something like that.**

**And yet, he did keep living. Sunny kept himself alive, and so did you.**

***How did you do it?***

**I keep asking myself whether I could have done what you did if it was for someone other than myself. I keep wondering if there was any situation where I could have kept a secret like that.**

**I keep asking myself what friends are. What they're supposed to do for each other.**

...

**Until Mari was gone, I had never even considered the idea that some people left life behind on purpose. I was just a child back then. Something like that was beyond me.**

**But you were different, weren't you?**

**I always thought it was kind of strange. The way you would talk, the books you would read... none of us were like you. You were different even back then.**

...

**I thought you were like me. I thought that you just needed a friend and then you would be okay. I guess I was wrong about that. Maybe you were a lot lonelier than I thought you were. I'm sorry I never noticed.**

**I knew you longer than anyone, but I never actually ended up understanding you at all, did I?**

**I'm sorry I couldn't be whatever person it was that you needed.**

...

**Was Sunny that person? Is that why you and him ended up as close as you did?**

**Was that closeness why you two were able to lie for so long? Did he matter more to you than we did? Even if it was for his sake, did the rest of us really never mean anything? Did you just not care?**

...

**Even now, I just can't bring myself to believe that. For as long as I knew you, no matter what I told you, I could always count on you to care. More than anyone else. Even when**

**everyone else was too busy, you always made time for me. You were my friend.**

**I should have treated you like one while you were still here. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Basil.**

*Aubrey felt her eyes start to water. A lump slowly grew in her throat.*

**As much as I still miss her**

**As much as I despise you for what you both hid from us**

**I still can't bring myself to blame you. Not for something like that.**

...

**Despite everything, part of me somehow still wants to believe you aren't gone. I want to believe that you wouldn't carry your awful secret alone for years just to disappear at the end. So please**

**So will you please just**

**just**

*Come back.* Aubrey felt the words repeat inside her head, but she couldn't bring herself to write them.

A tear fell onto Aubrey's notebook. It was far from the first, but maybe it would be the last.

Aubrey closed her journal and tried to stop crying. Even if she was in the middle of nowhere, crying outdoors still made her feel too... **exposed**. She felt like she was being watched. The entire world could see how weak and pathetic she was.

But Aubrey's pitiful attempts to compose herself were seemingly ineffective. Once more she'd been reduced to a sobbing mess by yet another friend who she would never see again. History always repeated itself in the cruelest ways.

Aubrey almost laughed to herself. She had spent so long preparing for this. The contents of her notebook were the proof of it. She should have known better than anyone how to move on from this exact tragedy, because she had already spent so many years practicing precisely that. Aubrey should have been able to step right over it.

And yet, Aubrey couldn't bring herself to take a single step. Aubrey wept alone in the woods like a child, because that is exactly what she was. She hadn't grown up even a single day since she'd lost her friends.

Even if her exterior had grown and changed and hardened over the years, Aubrey herself remained unaffected. She'd become frozen in time, thawing for a brief moment only to be overwhelmed by the cold all over again.

...

Aubrey tried to place her attention outside herself. She tried to focus on something in the environment... anything that would allow her to get a hold of herself. She couldn't keep doing this, especially if the others would come looking for her eventually.

And yet, nothing around her was good enough. It was all just an endless sea of cold, evergreen branches. Even as beautiful as such an untouched landscape could be, that beauty was but a window-dressing at best. Aubrey was old enough to see the truth now. This entire world was a nightmare.

...

After a few more minutes spent in quiet reflection, Aubrey finally started to feel a sense of composure return to her.

No... composure was the wrong word. It was just *numbness.* Aubrey slowly began to feel a quiet, numb sensation overtake her mind... but at least it was welcome this time.

Aubrey stood up from her log and took a deep breath, basking in the forest one final time. She was long overdue to get out of this place. There was nothing here for her. There never would be.

And yet, Aubrey's attention was finally grabbed by something poking out from the trees. She hadn't noticed it before, but there was something grey moving across the opposite side of the

valley in front of her.

At first, Aubrey thinks it's a wild animal... but as it moves further it slowly becomes obvious that the creature was travelling on two legs. It was a person.

*Another hiker,* Aubrey thought to herself.

Admittedly, Aubrey was rather surprised. She didn't think anyone else could possibly be out this far, and considering the time of day, the person walking on the opposite side of the valley must have been camping alone the previous night.

Aubrey couldn't imagine being stuck out here alone at night... *but maybe that experience appealed to people older than she was.* Maybe if you were a grown adult with a boring office job, then escaping to the middle of the woods by yourself became a much more appealing venture. Food for thought.

But as the person steadily drew a bit closer, Aubrey was surprised by the details which she picked up in their appearance. They seemed rather young, and a bit skinny. It was a girl her own age, probably.

...

But Aubrey wasn't exactly in the mood to socialize with strangers. The person opposite the valley was beginning to descend into it, and they seemingly had yet to notice her presence. As such, Aubrey decided to leave before it would become awkwardly obvious that she had been watching them. Looking up and realizing some random stranger was staring at you in the middle of the woods was probably one of the most unnerving experiences a person could have. There was no need to subject a poor, random stranger to something like that.

*But as Aubrey began to turn her head and walk away, she was suddenly frozen in place once again. To her horror, she watched as the hiker (possibly from moving too fast) tripped and fell onto the forest floor of the slope they were descending. Dumbstruck, Aubrey stared at their body as it rolled across the ground for several meters before finally hitting the base of a tree and getting stuck on the undergrowth.*

*Holy shit. Uh...*

As if on impulse, Aubrey quickly turned around and stepped forward, moving out from the trees and glancing slightly to the left, trying to discern whether or not the person had continued moving. They were completely still.

Aubrey began to quickly descend her side of the slope. She slipped on the rain-slicked rocks and ferns a few times, but largely managed to retain her own balance. After a brief dash, she hopped over the tiny creek at the bottom of the valley and glanced upward, attempting to make out whether or not the other person had stood up yet. She couldn't tell.

Aubrey started to slowly move upward in a brisk but hesitant walking pace. The last thing she wanted was to end up confronting some drugged-out weirdo in the middle of the woods... *but she couldn't just walk away after watching something like that.*

Aubrey finally started to catch up to the person she'd seen falling moments prior, so she cautiously approached them from the side. They were still on the ground and had gotten themselves somewhat entangled in the plants which had stopped their downward spiral.

"**Hey!**" Aubrey called out as forcefully as she could manage. *"Are you okay?"*

Aubrey heard the figure say something in response, but she couldn't quite make out what it was. Their tone was slurred and panicked. Aubrey felt a chill run down her spine.

Aubrey quickly ascended the slope and dashed over to the hiker as they began to slowly push themselves up off of the forest floor. Aubrey could finally tell that they were crying out for help, but their voice was pitifully weak.

"Are you hurt?" Aubrey quickly asked the other person what condition they were in. The stranger visibly struggled to remove themselves from the branches and brambles which had halted their violent descent.

"I'm fine!" The person claimed. "B-But my friend is hurt! He n-needs help!"

*Friend?* Aubrey quickly glanced further up the slope. She hadn't seen anyone else with them. The rest of the woods appeared empty.

Regardless, Aubrey finally caught up to the person opposite her, and quickly knelt down to try and help them up.

*"My friend's- friend-"* They continued stuttering in a panic. Aubrey tried not to let their audible fear get to her. Something really serious must have happened.

"It's g-gonna be alright." Aubrey attempted to calm them down, hoping she sounded confident.

The stranger lifted their head, and Aubrey ended up staring them dead in the face.

*Aubrey locked eyes with a pale-skinned young man, and felt all the blood in her veins freeze up at once.*

"He got injured... he..."

*The boy trailed off as his blue eyes grew wide. His expression of panic quickly evolved into one of abject horror.*

*A chill ran down Aubrey's spine. Her breath stopped instantly as an indescribable sensation of pins and needles began to swarm around the top of her head.*

*For but a single moment, all the motion of planet earth came to a close.*

...

...

"Basil?"

# Never That Easy

*Basil awakens into a darkened room.*

*He awakens with a cold terror swiftly filling his lungs. An all-consuming fear encompasses his entire body.*

*But the source of that fear fades quickly. Within mere moments, Basil had already begun to lose his grasp on the origin of his own terror. As his consciousness emerges from the nightmare, Basil's scream slowly dies out.*

*Basil's sudden fear disappears only to be replaced by a quiet sense of shame. The blonde stares in shock at his horrified partner. Sunny stared back at Basil with a wide eye.*

*The sudden return to silence was almost too much to bear.*

*...*

*Basil slowly placed his face into his hands.*

---

The gardener sat with his friend in the shadows.

*For the first time in a long time, Basil's mind had finally begun to grow empty. And, against all odds, it almost seemed to be staying that way.*

Basil listened as the continued downpour beat against the side of the building. His brain slowly span itself in and out of motion.

In spite of his previous fear, Basil now felt strangely calm. It was as if his body could no longer keep up with its own mounting sense of distress. He just couldn't keep hold of it.

The loss of tension in Basil's body was matched by an equal loss of tension between him and his friend. The blonde initially felt as though the air between him and Sunny might have still retained a hint of hostility, but that did not appear to be the case anymore. Sunny seemed just as disinterested in conflict as Basil was. Their shared silence was strangely peaceful, now.

And with that peaceful emptiness, Basil began to feel a small spark of trust slowly flicker back to life inside of him.

*Basil and his friend had opened their ugly hearts to one another for the hundredth time… but this time, it finally felt like everything had been placed aside.*

Basil had said countless wretched, distasteful and dishonest things to Sunny… but Basil's friend still chose to overlook his poisoned words. Against all odds, those insults were simply not as important to Sunny as Basil was. Once again, their childish arguments had slowly faded away into nothingness.

It was as if neither of them could stay angry at one another even if they tried. The pair simply lacked the ability to do so, or the interest in seeing each other through such an unappealing lens.

Even if Basil had still wanted to try and scare Sunny away with the ugliest parts of himself, the blonde wasn't sure how much uglier he could possibly get. Basil could scarcely imagine saying anything worse than what he already had.

The gardener's own bitter words repeated inside of his head. Basil felt himself wince over and over in response to the venomous insults which they had both thrown at each other.

But what felt far worse were all the genuine compliments which Sunny had forced upon him immediately afterward. Basil wanted to forget those words most of all. The blonde's newly-acquired memories twisted together and taunted him.

*Basil had kept insisting that Sunny didn't actually like him at all, but that pathetic defense was now full of holes.*

Basil had lost their battle, but he hadn't surrendered with grace. The blonde had gone down in a desperate, flailing fit of anguish.

And yet as horrific as they'd both been, none of it appeared to matter. Basil and his friend were alone in the mock bedroom again for what felt like the hundredth time. Nothing had

changed at all.

Nothing except for the fact that Sunny was being very quiet. Basil's friend was even more silent than usual, somehow. The other boy was trying to be considerate. Basil could tell.

The blonde's heart ached. He wanted to apologize again, but he'd apologized so many times by now that each of those same tired words and phrases were practically devoid of meaning. Through their absurd overuse, Basil had methodically ruined each and every one them.

This couldn't keep happening. Basil had crippled his own ability to express any more regret. If the blonde truly lamented all of the horrid things that kept arising between him and his friend, then Basil would have to find a way to prove it through actions instead of words. Just apologizing over and over again wasn't good enough.

…

And so, Basil's mind wandered back to what had transpired in the hall. He thought about how close his friend had come to kissing him again. Basil thought about how close he had come to accepting that kiss.

*But he still wasn't ready.* Basil couldn't continue being the one who only ever passively received his friend's affection. He couldn't let it all continue on in such a miserable, one-sided way. The guilt would have eaten him alive.

*But if Basil really couldn't let his friend's one-sided affection continue, then that left him only one other option.*

…

So the blonde inspected his friend's wounds, and then his own. The two of them needed to keep an eye on their own injuries, and that fact provided Basil with the perfect alibi. Swiftly growing red in the face, Sunny's friend used the pretense of rationality as an excuse to lay hands on him.

Once again, Basil and his companion shared their wounds with one another. However, this time it actually felt… ***real***.

*And as that feeling grew within Basil, so did his conviction. Sunny's friend brought himself to the edge of the unthinkable.*

*He stuttered and stalled, doing his best to make a fool of himself just as he always did... but Basil finally managed to do it. Their lips pressed together once more.*

*Basil apologized again… but without words.*

And after that drawn-out apology came to a gentle close, Basil finally let the truth slip past his lips. After all the years of crying and waiting and struggling, he just couldn't hold it back anymore.

A sudden expression of love sprung forth from Basil's mouth.

The air seemed to freeze immediately after those unspeakable words left Basil's lips. The lover waited afterward, but his forbidden phrase was not returned. Basil's friend didn't say it back. Sunny just froze up.

But Basil didn't mind. After all, the look on Sunny's face was more than enough for him.

He had never seen his friend turn quite so red before.

*Basil was sure that the expression Sunny wore would stay burned into his mind for as long as he lived.*

---

...

*The trick was to move in tiny increments.*

Basil's heart began to beat rapidly again as his quiet fear slowly overwhelmed him. He was barely moving, and yet every centimeter he put between himself and his friend made the blonde feel as though he was diffusing a bomb.

Sunny's fingers were still interlocked within his own. Despite the other boy having fallen into a deep sleep, their bodies remained somewhat entangled.

Basil had managed to sneak out of the bed before, but this was a very different situation. It was unlikely that such a boldfaced escape attempt would actually work out for him. Though Sunny might have been a very difficult person to awaken, a forceful getaway like this still made Basil feel as though he was pushing his newfound luck far past its breaking point.

The blonde held his breath as he lifted his hand a little more. Their palms detached, but Sunny's fingers remained intertwined with his. Basil froze in place to see if the other boy's breathing had changed… *but his friend still silently slumbered, somehow. Serious sleeping.*

*Basil desperately tried to calm himself down. Even if Sunny* ***did*** *wake up, he was going to be fine either way.*

After all, there was a backup plan in place. If Sunny awakened to his friend's escape, then Basil had already spent several minutes mentally preparing his excuse. *'I'm just going to the bathroom,'* he'd claim. If Sunny didn't accept that lie as truth, then Basil would kindly invite him along to prove it. There was nothing suspicious about going to the bathroom. If he had to abort his getaway, then Basil's backup plan was absolutely bulletproof... *kind of.*

*And so the blonde continued his painfully slow departure.*

Sunny appeared to be in a deep sleep, but sneaking out of the room while his friend was unconscious still filled Basil with a creeping feeling of dread.

After another achingly slow movement, Sunny's hand finally broke away from Basil's. Sunny's eyebrows flinched and his fingers contracted slightly, but he showed no other signs of waking. After a few brief moments had passed, the boy's expression returned to normal.

Basil felt a sudden wave of loss pass through him after the sensation of his friend's hand finally left his own, but he swallowed that brief regret and tried to continue retracting his arm as motionlessly as possible. After an excruciating effort, the blonde finally managed to begin shrinking his entire body away.

Every minuscule sound that was created by Basil's body brushing against the blanket felt unbelievably loud. Painfully loud. The blonde continued moving across the mattress, but he felt almost certain that the other boy was going to awaken right in the middle of his embarrassing escape. *Ugh…*

But to Basil's subsequent amazement (and terror), Sunny still remained in a state of slumber.

And so, with one final rotation of his body, Basil's feet somehow managed to hit the floor. He stood up from the bed while still looking back at his companion, and let out a quiet exhale of relief. The expensive mattress made no sound as it quickly readjusted to its previous form with Basil's bodily weight now removed.

Basil froze in place for a few more seconds as he waited to see if Sunny's awakening was simply coming with a short delay. However, the other boy remained just as peaceful as before. The blonde watched him take a few more gentle breaths before finally sneaking across the room and slipping his shoes back on. Basil pushed the display room door open, and hoped that the light from the hallway wouldn't make it all the way inside as he slipped out.

*Basil gently closed the door behind him as he stepped into the hall. He was all alone again. His body immediately loosened. He shuddered slightly.*

As if on cue, Basil promptly finds himself having to suppress a sudden urge to throw up. He holds his stomach and lurches forward, but the feeling dies down almost as quickly as it comes. *Basil was fine. He'd be fine.*

The urge to vomit was immediately followed by the urge to scream, but Basil also manages to choke that sensation down.

What he could not suppress, however, was the boiling hot feeling of embarrassment that crawled into his face the moment that his friend had finally left his field of vision.

*Ahh…*

***AAAAUUUUUUUUUUUUUUAAAAAAAAAAGHGHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!***

*Basil clutched his chest, attempting to endure the oncoming feeling of a silent scream as the cry for help tried its best to violently escape his head.*

*This was it. He was actually going to die. Sunny was going to walk out of the bedroom in a few hours and find Basil's lifeless body curled up in the hallway. He'd be like the world's least-noteworthy leather carpet. Maybe Sunny would trip and fall over onto his friend's swiftly-rotting corpse.*

*Basil tries to lessen his absurd panic but he fails. He tries to steady his racing heartbeat but it barely slows at all. Every second Basil spends trying to calm himself is seemingly wasted.*

*The gardener lets out a panicked exhale but his heartbeat only starts to escalate all over again. The only thing Basil had going for him was that his ridiculous escape attempt had been a shocking success. If the blonde had been forced to spend another second in that bed he would have probably gone completely insane.*

*Basil needed a single moment by himself. He just needed a moment.*

*...*

*Maybe a long string of consecutive moments.*

*Basil took a second to reconsider everything that just happened.*

***Did Sunny really fall asleep after all of that?***

*Sleeping?* ***Sleeping?*** *How could he fall asleep so easily at a time like this? How did Sunny sleep at all? Was he just stupid?*

*Wasn't it unfair of Sunny to fall asleep right now? Wasn't it too cruel of him to leave Basil alone with all these new feelings buzzing around inside his head? Didn't they need to talk it all over a bit more? Wasn't it irresponsible to let everything go on so casually?*

*Basil felt the corner of his mouth start twitching. His lips had begun to forcibly smile without his permission. No matter how hard Basil tried, he could not manage to get the muscles in his cheeks under control.*

The sensation was so powerful that it almost hurt. Basil tried to physically rub the newfound pattern off of his face but to no avail.

*Hehe.. haha… hehe…*

*The butterflies inside of Basil's stomach swarmed together angrily before suddenly attacking his soft interior flesh.* ***Ow****. Ow ow ow.*

*Sunny said… did… Sunny… Sun…*

*Basil wrapped an arm around his abdomen and curled over slightly. It hurt.*

*Oh...* ***god****.*

On a surface level, the blonde knows that he can't let himself continue getting worked up like this. That much was obvious. Even still, Basil couldn't shake the feeling that if he let himself get truly lost in this new flood of emotion that the repeated waves would end up completely suffocating him.

The swarm of butterflies in Basil's stomach seemed to gnaw at the giant horizontal slash that ran through his abdomen. Every new (and highly-embarrassing) thought running through Basil's head became intensely painful once it slowly reached down into the burning injury in his guts.

All in all, Basil was actually becoming terribly nauseous. His wobbling legs seemed almost crippled by total exhaustion. He seriously needed to go back to sleep, ideally for as long as possible. Basil needed rest just as badly as his friend, but the concept of sleep felt almost ridiculous at a time like this... *after an experience like that.*

*Basil felt as if he'd completely lost the ability to form a single coherent thought. All the chlorophyll in his brain had been pressed together into useless green juice.*

*'I like the way you s-smile... and stuff...'* Sunny's words echoed in Basil's head. The look on his face crept back into Basil's mind.

*Sunny was an idiot. Don't look at him like that. Haha... ha...*

**You're having way too much fun right now. You don't deserve th-**

But even the spiteful criticisms lurking inside of his own skull meant nothing to Basil now. He was much too far gone. His mind had been fully converted into a pathetic puddle of liquid that sloshed around as he continued wobbling back and forth.

Basil tried to wipe off the smile on his face once again, but to no avail.

***This was bad.*** Basil needed a way to ground himself. He had to gain some semblance of composure before tomorrow morning.

He needed to become… *normal.* Preferably in as short a timeframe as possible.

The rain had finally stopped, and the ice and snow would be swiftly melting away. If no one came to save them, then now would be the ideal time for him and Sunny to finally save themselves. *Surely a building of this size could not possibly be far from civilization...*

The weather outside had been the biggest barrier preventing Basil and his friend from seeking assistance elsewhere, but now that barrier had finally fallen.

In addition, they had both acquired relatively-appropriate clothes and shoes. Appropriate enough, anyway. Better than what they arrived with.

Even in their injured state, a brief stint down the road wouldn't kill them. For all they knew, help might have been just down the cliffside this entire time. Waiting for assistance that should have come ages ago was no longer a reasonable proposition.

And as such, Basil **really** needed to get himself back together. He needed to continue getting rest while there was still spare time left to do so.

Basil needed to turn around, march straight back into that bedroom, and pass out until dawn broke the sky.

*But Basil could never do that. Of course he couldn't.*

The blonde had gotten himself so worked up that he could *throw* up. Basil felt as though he had just consumed five entire teapots in a single sitting. He felt like the very blood in his veins had spontaneously turned into orange joe through some kind of unholy biochemical reaction.

*Basil was wired.* The neurons firing in his brain were painfully erratic now, each of them having been rendered incapable of organizing a single logical thought. Not that Basil didn't try.

Were him and Sunny… *in a relationship now? Was that how relationships worked? Did Basil have to ask first? If they* ***were*** *in a relationship, did that mean they would kiss again? Would they kiss right after Sunny woke up?*

*But what if Sunny didn't want to kiss him anymore? He'd started hesitating earlier...* ***what if Sunny made Basil ask for it?***

*Basil could never ask for it like that. It would kill him. Sunny was so selfish.*

*Don't… don't make him ask…*

**The blonde violently pinched himself on the leg in a poor attempt to return to reality.** This bit was going on for far too long. No matter how he might have felt right now, nothing could change the simple fact that ***sleep was no longer optional***.

Even in the face of his newfound anxiety, Basil couldn’t let himself slip into that same old spiral. This wasn’t a joke. The two of them needed to leave soon.

*They needed to leave soon...*

...

***Didn't they?***

…

*Then again, maybe it wasn’t the end of the world if the two of them didn’t leave tomorrow. They were both a little hurt, but it wasn't as if they were* ***dying****. The two of them had been fine so far, hadn't they?*

...

And besides, maybe those injuries themselves were a good enough reason to stay put. Sunny wasn't currently in the best condition to travel, after all. He might have started slowly getting the hang of walking again, but having him parade down some icy asphalt roadway in the middle of the woods seemed extremely... *ambitious*, to say the least.

And Basil himself felt terrible. Like he was going to throw up, or pass out…

*Or both.*

So if Basil really couldn't sleep tonight, then a little more rest would surely still be warranted, right?

…

*The blonde took a deep breath… and then another. He felt himself calm down slightly. Kind of.*

Basil decided that maybe he would go for a brief walk around the building. The blonde could discuss all of this with his friend tomorrow morning. Basil just needed to burn off some nervous energy before he tried to close his eyes again. Just a quick walk, and he would be straight back to bed.

*Straight back to bed with Sunny. Back to bed with Sunny.*

***Straight back to b-***

---

*After a brief scramble through the halls (which he barely even remembered), Basil found himself walking into one of the offices on the ground floor. It was of the general sort that he and his friend had poked through together on the night they'd arrived. It felt as though the two of them had already dug through just about everything, but the longer Basil looked around, the more unexplored corners revealed themselves. All in all, he began to have significant difficulty discerning where he'd already looked and where he hadn't.*

Basil opened a random drawer under someone's desk and began thumbing through the papers contained within, pretending as if he was intently looking for something when in reality he wasn't doing much at all. The gardener simply hoped that if he pretended he had an important mental task to do that his brain would temporarily lose track of the nerve-wracking situation he was in. Basil attempted to distract himself just long enough for his body to relax.

*And, much to Basil's surprise, it was almost working.* Something about illegally flipping through a bunch of useless business documents was a strangely grounding experience. Considering how taboo it all felt, it eventually became almost impossible to NOT focus on what you were doing.

*Flip flip flip. Basil quietly passed through a collection of old tables and graphs.*

As the blonde reached the end of his well-skimmed business proceedings, he quickly moved onto the next desk and its associated filing cabinet. Basil scratched at his cheek and exhaled.

Many of the cabinets had already been opened and closed by him and his friend before, so the contents inside a few had gotten more than a bit messy. Basil hoped no one would mind. The two of them had been in a bit of a rush, after all.

Basil continued skimming through poorly organized documentation as his eyes glazed over. He almost felt himself begin to daydream about Sunny again... until he suddenly picked out a peculiar item that had somehow managed to evade his eye.

Initially, the small, folded paper was peculiar only because of how out-of-place it seemed to be. It was a brochure for some kind of museum. *'A collection of natural and historical wonders,'* it read. *'Come explore the history of these legendary mountains!'*

Basil skimmed through the brochure's contents. It came across as rather boring. All in all, the contents of the advertisement itself did not seem particularly notable. The only strange part about it was the image on the front.

An oddly-familiar object had been photographed and displayed on the first panel. Pictured on the front of the brochure was an image of a man-shaped statue dramatically standing in the center of a concrete pool. Yellow text boldly declared the museum's grand opening as it wrapped around the border of the image.

*Basil squinted as to confirm his immediate impression. Surely enough, his initial suspicions were correct.*

There was no mistaking it. The statue on display was the exact same statue that overlooked this building's largest stairwell. It was the same statue which stood at the end of the display hallway. Basil and his friend had both passed under it several times by now.

Basil's eyebrows knit slightly. *Weird. That didn't make sense.*

This place was definitely *not* some kind of science museum. It had been difficult to get a grasp on what exactly this strange building was really designed for, but there was certainly nothing of scientific or historical merit here. Maybe this *exotic furniture-store/home-design-showcase/office/creepy warehouse/whatever-the-hell-it-was* had simply purchased their giant statue from an out of business educational venture.

Basil absentmindedly scratched the side of his face. Such an acquisition wouldn't have been all that bizarre given everything else which he'd already seen being stored in the warehouse beneath them. That massive room held an expansive hoard of all sorts of random props, ornamental art pieces and other arcane decorations.

Basil didn't really understand the point of it himself, but he was sure that all of it had to have been put together by someone with hobbies far more expensive than he was capable of wrapping his head around.

But as Basil inspected the image further, his own theory began to slowly break apart. The room where the image had been taken really did look exactly the same as the statue staircase in this building. It was a perfect match down to the smallest detail. If Basil squinted at the background, it became plain as day.

*Same shape, same colors. Complete overlap. Basil could even see the supply closet door quietly tucked away in the corner.*

The blonde itched at the side of his nose. So maybe this building had originally been some kind of museum?

If that **were** true, then it would probably explain the bizarre layout of the building. This place didn't really feel like a storefront or office building. It was designed more like it was intended to be some kind of tourist trap. The hallways were wide, the lobby was huge… *not to mention that the cafeteria seemed rather extraordinary for a purely-corporate venture.*

*Cubicles notwithstanding, it all felt far more like a place of amusement than a place of business.*

Basil flicked through the brochure from front to end. The only other notable photos showed taxidermized bears and other wild animals propped up behind educational notecards. Basil could have sworn that some of the rooms in the brochure were the same rooms that lay connected to the display hall, but it was a lot harder for him to tell.

Fortunately, the final image on the back of the brochure swiftly confirmed Basil's suspicions. It depicted an enormous, windowless room filled with what appeared to be old military vehicles and several small aircraft. The absurd scale of the space was unmistakable. Even if its contents changed at some point, Basil had **definitely** been down there before.

...

Basil spent a few more moments digging around to see if he could find any other museum references hiding amongst the sea of timetables and spreadsheets, but nothing notable came into view. *Oh well. It looked like his little detective game was over.*

The blonde placed a stack of documents back into their previous position, trying not to wrinkle their edges too much as he laid them down.

Or at least Basil was **going** to lay them down, but he paused when he noticed that what he had initially thought was the bottom of the filing cabinet was actually just a small chunk of corkboard. The rectangle of cork was almost perfectly-shaped to the width of the drawer itself, having been very-haphazardly wedged inside.

Basil pulled the board out and turned it over, but all it showed was some boring bar graph which had seemingly been taped onto the front. No more mysteries here.

So the blonde reached downwards to place the corkboard back onto its original resting place-

***But his hand was quickly brought to a pause***.

*Basil's eyes suddenly fell upon an item that stole his focus entirely. The boy's heart nearly stopped in response.*

*In this instant, Basil finds something that he had been searching for since the moment him and his friend had arrived in this strange place. Basil finds an item that he'd hoped the two of them would have managed to locate a long time ago.*

*But despite the blonde's prolonged frustrations, that coveted object had finally come into view.* ***A cellular flip phone sat quietly at the bottom of the drawer.***

*Basil stared at it in shock. The tiny metal device continued resting in silence, seemingly unconcerned by its intruder's sudden gaze. The phone's lifeless diodes and transistors*

*possessed no knowledge of their significance in this moment, after all. The blonde's breath hitched in his throat as he struggled to make sense of what he was seeing.*

...

All things considered, there were a million obvious reasons to believe that this tiny glint of hope was merely an illusion. This phone had been left abandoned at the bottom of a drawer. When Basil picked it up, he was likely to find that it was simply broken. Maybe the battery was long-dead and he would find nothing to charge it with. Maybe the phone itself would turn on just fine, but the blonde would find that there was no cell reception in this isolated place. It's not as if any of the other phones had been cooperative so far. This one was likely going to be no different.

With Basil's luck, it would inevitably become yet another dead end set up exclusively for the purpose of mocking him; a trap that existed solely to rub the blonde's face in the continued cosmic absurdity which had now fully-encompassed his miserable little life.

...

*And yet, there still remained an undeniable possibility that the object in front of Basil would provide him and his friend with a means of convenient escape from this prison...*

So Basil found himself staring at the phone in awe. That symbol of faint hope lingered mere inches from his fingers, waiting to reveal the truth to Basil with just one small motion. The boy simply needed to pick it up so he might finally reveal his fate.

...

But, to the blonde's own surprise, his hand did **not** reach down to pick up the phone. Rather, he merely continued to stare at it, as if the object itself were going to somehow leap out at him. Basil stood in wait, as if the phone were going to receive a random call which he would then be drawn to answer. Over and over Basil languished under the expectation that the phone was just about to suddenly ring and reveal that the cruel game show he'd been trapped inside was finally over, and that the blonde himself had ultimately been declared the unlucky winner.

*It was inevitable. The phone would ring and reveal that all of this had been recorded. Every moment of it had been captured using hidden cameras built into the walls of this building. It was all nothing more than an elaborate work of fiction.*

*Basil knows its coming. It was going to ring any second. The phone would ring and call the dirty little liar out for all the horrid things he had been doing.*

*Every bit of it was nothing more than yet another punchline at Basil's expense. There was no avoiding it.*

*And as such, Basil knew it would likely be in his best interest to simply pick the phone up and get it all over with. Nothing left to lose now, was there?*

*So Basil finally reached out his hand.*

*...*

*But while he quietly stared his mock salvation in the face, a twisted little feeling suddenly arose inside of Basil.*

*And with the birth of that unfortunate new sensation, an inexplicable event takes place. A tragedy happens. Something that should never happen.*

*Something that even Basil himself cannot fully make sense of. His body moves, but it feels almost as if he's watching someone else pilot him from a distance.*

*Yet another twisted act is carried out by the boy's nervous hands. A hideous, unforgivable, horrid motion for which there were no witnesses other than the perpetrator himself. Basil feels ill.*

*Even after all his countless sins, this one was vile enough that even Basil remained shocked by the sudden movement that overtakes his body.*

***Slowly, and with gentle hands... the corkboard and stack of papers which had been concealing the phone were put back into place.***

***The documents were carefully laid down in the exact same order in which they had been removed. Each of the random, pointless pages was now intentionally joined together and molded into a tool of self-deceit.***

***And with that intentional act of self-deception, the ray of hope which Basil had found was covered up. The little liar stopped, and looked down at what he'd done.***

***The forgotten phone was concealed once more. Basil never even touched it.***

*Basil cannot bring himself to fully acknowledge why, but he suddenly feels a burning desire to go back in time. He wants to have never seen the phone in the first place. If he hadn't seen it at all, then he wouldn't have had to do this. If he had not found such a thing, then he would not have had to watch himself act out this senseless fabrication. He wished with every fiber of his being that the memory of what he had seen would simply vanish from the inside of his head. Basil wished that the knowledge of his own actions would suddenly break apart and fade into nothing.*

***But that wasn't going to happen. Basil knew better than anyone that its never that easy.***

*And so, Basil hides the phone instead.*

*In this moment, if a sudden observer were to ask the blonde why he would ever commit such an abhorrent action, Basil was sure that he would have no excuse to give. There was nothing in the world that he would be able to say in his own defense. Basil would only be able to curl up into a ball and await his well-deserved punishment. This action was inexcusably, unbelievably selfish.*

There was no justification for what Basil was doing and yet, somehow... *it all felt so painfully familiar.*

Each of the worst events in Basil's life had followed a similar pattern. He would see or hear something that was never meant for his eyes or ears, and the tiny strings of fear created from those horrible revelations would puppet his hands to move in ways which they should never have moved.

His palms would stretch to conjure terrible falsehoods, each one carefully crafted to shut out the truth from himself and the people around him. It was a never-ending parade of lies and acts and cover-ups. Each of those countless deceits allowed Basil to pretend as if the events he had witnessed were simply never seen in the first place.

One might think that after being punished for hiding those truths so many times before, Basil would have learned to finally stop acting this way... but the opposite was somehow true. The cycle repeated itself over and over, each time becoming more painful than the last.

*It was a twisted pattern through which Basil's pitiful attempts to prevent his own suffering only served to make that same suffering much, much worse.*

Regardless of whether or not Basil was capable of of explaining or justifying it to himself, the blonde knew that there was a reason that he always became like this... *even if he had attempted to hide that truth deep under the growing weight of his own desperation.*

*And yet, it appeared to continually poke back out again. Every time Basil had ever held a new fragment of hope inside him, the world seemed intent on tearing it away. Everything that he had ever hoped for had been stolen from him, often what felt like mere moments after those hints of joy had been given. With every subsequent loss, the next became more vicious. This pattern had drawn on and on for so long that Basil could no longer see a positive outcome in anything, even though he had spent so much of his life trying to do exactly that.*

*The world around him was a dark, empty pit now…* ***within which only one final ray of sunlight remained****.*

Basil shuddered. With every new tragedy, his sense of self shrank further. Meanwhile, his desire to protect himself from that pain only grew and grew. It violently expanded until the fear of those sudden punishments slowly began to dictate his every action. For Basil, every tiny particle of hope that had appeared before him seemed as if it must have been concealing some kind of trap. Yet another cruel joke that some restless god was pulling on him.

*It was like a test that Basil was presented with over and over, but yet he always managed to fail. No matter how many times he tried, Basil never learned his lesson.*

*But one fact was for certain: the only thing that Basil felt more intensely than his growing affection for Sunny was the fear of losing him again. The origin of that obsessive fear might have been older and deeper than even Basil himself really understood, but its grasp on his mind still remained undeniable.*

***Basil was afraid of losing.*** *Basil was far more afraid of loss than anything else. He was so, so terrified that everything he'd been given would inevitably slip through his fingers all over again.*

*That was why he'd been fighting it. That was why Basil had gone to such unbelievable lengths to fight off the mere idea of his friend's affection for him. If Basil refused to accept*

*any more undeserved gifts, then he wouldn't have to lament losing them again.*

*And yet, Basil **had** accepted those gifts. Basil had accepted more affection from Sunny than he could have possibly imagined.*

*And as such, Basil could only guess that this must have been his punishment for it.*

*This exact moment was exactly what Basil had been so afraid of.*

*He'd known back then, in that darkened storage room... while staring down at the blade in his hands... that if Basil were to keep putting off his escape he was inevitably going to hurt his only friend again. Basil knew that he would only continue to hurt him over and over through his deranged, possessive psychosis.*

*If the two of them had been anywhere else, or at any other point in time, then maybe Basil could have finally done it. The only thing that had held him back from finally finishing the wound which wept from his stomach was the fear that his friend would be incapable of escaping this place without him. It would have been wrong to do it then.*

*But these strange new aspects of Basil were even more self-absorbed. What he displayed now was nothing short of shameless, boldfaced sociopathy.*

***But Basil knows he has no choice**. He hides the phone away because he simply **couldn't** touch it yet. He needed more time.*

*But this action wasn't permanent. Basil asked only to delay the inevitable... or at least that's what he tells himself. If he had just a little more time alone with Sunny, then there could still be a chance that all of Basil's undeserved blessings would last.*

*If the blonde had just a little longer, then **this time** he was sure he could implant himself in his companion's head. Basil was sure that he could mend their nightmarish history just enough to save himself. With just a little more time, Basil would be able to undo all of the harsh words that he had said, and slowly reveal all of the desperate feelings which he had been covering up for longer than he could even remember.*

*This time, their shared promise would be kept. If Basil just had a little while longer, then he was certain that he could trick his friend into loving him. Basil could trick Sunny into loving him back.*

*After all, his friend was already halfway there. Sunny already liked him in that way. Basil's companion had said so himself, and acted on that affection accordingly. Basil trembled as the*

*remnants of Sunny's lips lingered all over him. He was in a better position now than he had ever been before.*

*Now the sad little spider just needed to weave his web… and trap Sunny before he could escape. Basil needed to transform their temporary affection into something that would still linger once this nightmare was over.*

*Sunny's attraction towards Basil might have been genuine, it might have been guilt, it might have been desperation, or it might have been some twisted assortment of the three. In the end, it didn't matter. To Basil, his new end goal remained the same.*

*As unthinkable as it was, Sunny had... for the time being...* ***fallen for him.***

*And so Basil held the other boy within his grasp. The warm glow of the sun itself lingered within his hands.*

*But even still, that warmth was not yet close enough. Basil's friend needed to be thoroughly bound to him now, because it was only through the entrapment of this place that Sunny had revealed such insane, unthinkable feelings in the first place.*

*Against all odds, Sunny had washed ashore on Basil's little island…* ***but now he needed to be caught****.*

*Basil knew that if he could finally manage to do that, then his friend would not leave him behind this time. This was nothing like before, after all.*

*So Basil just needed a little longer. Once he had finally stolen the other boy away completely, then he could simply return to this drawer and* ***'find'*** *the phone for the first time. Everything would play out exactly as it needed to. Sunny would be happy to escape this terrible place, and the little liar beside him would finally break free from the lonely prison that he'd been trapped inside for four long years.*

*This was the way it had to be.*

...

***Disgusting. Basil is disgusting. He knows it.***

*And yet, that disgust was the very reason Basil knew he had to do this. Sunny had acted as if he loved him, but nobody knew better than Basil that actions like those were never enough. People 'loving' you was something weak, fragile and temporary. Practically fake.*

*It was nothing more than a fleeting emotion, and people's emotions could change so quickly and easily that there was no use in ever really trusting them. Even if Basil's friend genuinely loved him in this moment, the blonde could not simply hope that such a convenient emotion was going to last once they were torn apart again... especially not if it had formed inside a strange hell like this.*

*Basil knows all too well that people get sick of their friend's dysfunctions eventually… but* ***his*** *dysfunctions were far worse than anyone else's. He was nothing short of an absolute mental case. Pretend as he might, the blonde could not hide the truth from himself forever. Basil was undeniably, irrevocably insane.*

*Love was the type of feeling that a person like Basil would always ruin, because a person like Basil would never deserve that love in the first place.*

*And so, a person like Basil… would do what he had to do.*

*In this moment, Basil tries his absolute hardest to detach from himself… but he cannot. He strains to re-empty his mind as he moves back from the drawer, but each of his fragile attempts falls to pieces right in front of him. And yet, Basil still desperately struggles to convince himself that what he had just seen was simply some kind of illusion.*

*In the end, everything about his life was already unbelievable. So why couldn't it have just been a strange hallucination after all? It wouldn't have been the first time that his shattered mind had visually altered the world around him.* ***Surely the contents of that drawer could just fade away...***

*Basil sees the truth about himself approaching once again, but he attempts to escape it. Basil just wants to keep dreaming his pleasant dream for a little while longer.*

*After all, it had been so,* ***so*** *long since a pleasant dream like this one had come around.*

And something like this would likely never come around again.

And there was no one else here to see Basil enjoy it.

**So who was going to stop him?**

*Basil retreats from the drawer, and from the desk, and from the office. He walks back down the hall, past the windows, and past the entire world.*

*The inside of his skull is once again transformed into a bottomless pit of self-directed condemnations, but Basil himself ignores all of his sudden doubts and anguishes. He couldn't muster any response to them even if he tried.*

*There were so many hideous voices now that they simply layered on top of one another, ultimately drowning each other out as they conglomerated together into empty background noise. It was a curse so vicious that it dispelled itself.*

*Before he knows it, Basil is back at the bedroom door. He stands just outside, staring at the handle. Basil hesitates for a moment before slowly opening it again. He tries to make as little sound as possible.*

*The blonde drifts back into the display room. Basil returns to the other side of the bed, creeping slowly. He wants to avoid upsetting Sunny's peaceful slumber.*

*Basil slowly creeps across the furniture showcase and approaches his friend's side of the bed.*

*Sunny was still sleeping. He took gentle breaths as he slumbered, remaining almost completely motionless. Basil's companion had no idea of the struggle which his friend had just gone through.*

*As always, Basil felt sorry again. He wanted to apologize to Sunny for what he was doing right now...* ***but maybe it wasn't as bad as he had been making it out to be****.*

*Ultimately, this would all play out to his friend's advantage. Basil would make sure of it.*

*Basil was positive that Sunny would understand all of his choices, eventually.*

***And so, in this quiet moment, Basil makes another promise. Basil makes a silent promise to both Sunny and himself.***

*Basil promises that no matter what happened from this point forward... he would always remain a useful tool. If nothing else, Basil would at least ensure that he was a friend worth keeping.*

*Obviously what Basil was doing was selfish, but maybe it didn't matter? Even if the origins of his actions were self-centered, this one lie would benefit them both in the end. As of now, everything would be better this way.*

*Maybe one day Sunny would curse him for this, but Basil didn't care. Even if Sunny were to ultimately throw him away, Basil would never hate his friend for it.*

*Because if Sunny really, truly loved him…* ***then Basil would return that love until his final breath.***

*Basil bent over his friend slightly, and felt a small smile take hold of him. It was a weak smile, and somewhat forced... but it helped him swallow down the last of his regrets.*

*Basil ignored his pointless anguishes and focused on his companion. Sunny's breaths were shallow, but calm.*

*Sunny was always so cute when he was sleeping. Basil hoped that he was having good dreams.*

*As he watched over Sunny, Basil found himself slowly filling up with some deranged sense of self-satisfaction. He leaned over Sunny to get a better look at his friend's face...*

*But as Basil crept forward to stretch his gaze... one final, unwanted feeling crawled up into his head. A sudden sense of undeniable familiarity came charging at Basil.* ***Deja vu****.*

*In this moment, something about watching Sunny sleep became painfully familiar. Maybe it was the position he slept in, or the expression on his face…*

*…*

*So far, Basil had been trying not to stare at Sunny too much whenever he wasn't awake. Doing so felt rather selfish, and invasive.*

*But in this moment, as Basil indulges himself in a prolonged gaze… he could not deny how similar it all felt.*

*It was as if he had seen Sunny in this exact position before. Even after all their years spent apart, Sunny still looked exactly the same as Basil remembered.*

*Basil had seen his friend just like this before. He knew it. It might have been a coincidence spawned from the way that Sunny was positioned, or maybe the look on his face...*

*Regardless, having been struck by that mounting familiarity, Basil allowed himself the momentary privilege of losing himself in his memories. He took a breath and searched the back of his mind for the gentle origin of that familiar feeling.*

*It doesn't take long for him to find it. As it turned out, the memory Basil had misplaced was nothing special, really.*

*It was back in the old treehouse. All of Sunny's other friends had awakened and abandoned him, but Basil could not bring himself to leave Sunny behind. He just watched over Sunny's sleeping form with a tiny smirk on his face.*

*Watching someone sleep always made Basil feel like a bit of a creep, but Mari had ensured him that it was nothing to get worked up about. She was always...*

*...*

*Basil felt himself emerge from his memories instantaneously. His smile disappeared. His deranged sense of satisfaction dissipated into the air.*

*With a single moment of clarity, Basil finally snaps out of himself.*

*Haha.*

*Hahaha…*

…

It was almost funny, in a way.

Until just now, Basil hadn't even realized his mistake.

It had been four long years, but today was the first day in which he had ever forgotten.

Basil had, for but a few minutes at best, been so wrapped up in his new sins that he'd forgotten about his old ones. It really was just that simple.

He didn't think it would even be possible… to live a single moment in which he would truly forget… *but it had actually happened.*

It had all left his mind. **She** had left his mind. For the first time since the actions he'd taken that night… for just a single, empty moment… ***she was finally gone***. Forgotten.

To Basil's disbelief, ***Mari had vanished from his head just like everything else.***

...

*The blonde pulled his hand away from Sunny's. He pulled himself away from whatever dreams were churning inside the other boy's head.*

*And yet, strangely, Basil's own head was empty. There were no voices anymore. No mocking tongues screamed inside of Basil's skull to punish him for his attempted escape. No twisted delusions manifested to deride him for his inability to change himself. In the end, the interior of his mind had been reduced to complete silence.*

*A truly monstrous silence.*

*But alongside that silence, Basil finally managed to compose himself.*

Basil retracted his hand, because he was about to make a terrible mistake.

Basil shrunk away from his friend, because there was nothing for him here.

Basil walked back down the hallway very slowly, because he knew he needed to burn this feeling into his mind.

Basil returned to the office, because he wasn't going to be selfish anymore.

Basil opened the drawer again, because some of his mistakes could still be corrected.

Basil uncovered the phone, because there was never any excuse for hiding it.

*Basil immediately flipped the device open, but he knew it wasn't going to light up. Of course it wouldn't.*

...

And yet, the phone lights up. It's bright.

The phone did work. It didn't even need to be charged. It had some brief hint of battery life remaining, a final gift from whomever had abandoned it there.

Against all odds, it really worked. Basil could do it. He could call someone with this.

...

But then the screen goes black. A low-battery symbol appears, and persists.

Basil panics. He flips the phone open again, but nothing happens. He rams his fingers into the keypad, but the phone remains black.

Basil digs around the bottom of the drawer but finds nothing. He digs into the piles of documents and old folders and finds nothing. *Basil looks under the cabinet and under the desk and the neighbor's desk and the neighbor's cabinet...*

Basil frantically jams random cords and cables into the device but nothing fits. Over and over again Basil tries and fails to locate the one little wire that would save him.

But as much as he struggles, Basil still comes up empty handed. The brief ray of light does not appear for him again. As it existed right now, the blonde's newfound tech was about as useful as a paperweight with an LED screen.

Exhausted, Basil finally stops flailing. He drops the phone back into the cabinet and slowly takes a seat on the floor.

*Haha.*

Basil found himself staring at his hands, but was unsure why. For whatever reason, he suddenly felt like they weren't really his own.

Even if they obviously belonged to him, something about the two of them just didn't quite fit. Both of Basil's hands looked... a lot older than he'd remembered.

Although he still felt like a child, Basil's body really had changed quite a lot over the years. Basil was almost surprised that he hadn't noticed... but maybe he shouldn't have been so shocked. He'd spent such a long time trying to ignore himself, after all. More time than he could remember.

*A countless deluge of abandoned days, each thrown away in hopes that the next would somehow be different. A life set aside in hopes of returning to even a single echo of the life which had been lost.*

...

All things considered, Basil really had been offered an unthinkable gift, hadn't he? He'd been waiting so, so long for him and Sunny's inevitable separation only to wake up and find them both whisked away to a fantastical place like this at the very last moment.

Nightmarish as it all was, being torn away from the rest of the world had still allowed Basil to grow close to his friend in a way that he could never have possibly imagined happening again. In the end, being stranded here really was an unbelievable opportunity to set things right.

And after all was said and done… *what had Basil actually done with that opportunity?*

…

Even now, Basil still didn't believe any of it. Not really.

Even after everything he'd been gifted, it all still seemed fake.

Deep down, Basil still couldn't shake the feeling that there was no way his friend's affection could ever be real. It all just felt too… ***easy***.

But if it was all really that easy, then shouldn't this feeling have left him by now?

*If his friend's love was the truth, then why did Basil still feel this way? Why had his fear and panic and distrust only continued to grow?*

*Was it wrong of Basil to have returned his friend's desires in the first place? After all the pointless resisting he'd done… was it still too short-sighted of him? How long was he supposed to hold it all in?*

*What had even happened to Basil? Hadn't he been overcome by his own happiness only a few minutes earlier? Where had all that joy vanished to? How had he managed to destroy it all over again?*

…

Basil had told himself that he wanted to be honest. He'd told himself that he wanted to be honest about what he felt towards his friend, in the same way that he hoped Sunny had been honest towards him.

But in truth, that was just an excuse. Basil had reflected his friend's affection only because this would have been his final opportunity to do so. He was still just as pathetic and clawing as he had been before.

The blonde's end goal might have changed, but his self-absorbed desperation had remained the same as it always was.

Ultimately, it was just as detestable of Basil to cling to Sunny as it was to push him away.

***But did Basil even have a choice?*** If he'd really decided that he didn't want to die, then could he even manage to survive by himself anymore?

Without Sunny, or his friends, or his grandparents… *what would Basil even have left?*

...

Even after all the many years spent alone, Basil still couldn't shed the weight that his childhood memories had placed on him.

All of Basil's other motivations and desires had been stripped from him a long time ago. After losing the perfect world that he'd been invited into, nothing else seemed even remotely meaningful by comparison.

None of Basil's hopes or dreams would ever become as important to him as what he'd already lost.

*And as such, those old losses controlled him.*

Basil had already gotten everything that he'd ever wanted, and he'd shattered it. The only reason he'd even continued onwards this long was to finish picking up all of the broken pieces.

But maybe Basil had already picked up far more pieces than he could possibly hold. Maybe there was no point in trying to push himself any further.

So, when all was said and done... ***what was out there for him now?***

*Without someone else to make use of him, would Basil even feel capable of standing on his own two feet?*

*Hadn't Sunny been the only reason he'd even stuck around this long? Was that why he thought it was okay to dig his claws into him again?*

…

Maybe Basil didn't even care anymore.

Maybe it was wrong for him to have continued humoring his own twisted little desires so long after everything they'd already ended up taking from everyone around him.

Maybe everything he'd done since that day had been just one small part of the same giant mistake.

But it had felt nice to believe otherwise... *for one beautiful, perfect moment.*

Basil had managed to fool himself one last time.

*The blonde stared down at his hands once more, but nothing had changed. They were still just hands.*

*Basil shuts the drawer. He slowly creeps out of the offices and back into the windowed hall at the front of the building. Once again, Basil walks towards the front of the lobby... but he doesn't turn back to the metal doors this time.*

*Instead, Basil quietly turns to stare out the windows by himself.*

*The truck they awoke in had not moved an inch. Its sliding door was still hanging open from when the two of them had gutted it of its mattresses and blankets. The remnants of their old flame was still easily visible in the form of a massive black stain on the asphalt. The bushes which Basil had pointlessly rambled on about remained just as unaffected by the cold as before. Same old nightmare.*

*And yet, if one were to somehow forget about all of the horror and confusion and desperation, then it might have actually looked rather pretty outside. The snow had largely melted into small patches of ice, and the roaring wind appeared to have diminished into a quiet breeze. Basil watched as that breeze gently brushed past the trees... each of which were now clearly visible on the opposite side of the lot.*

*It was an endless army of evergreens. They were kind of beautiful, really. Basil had almost forgotten that trees could look so captivating at night. He'd spent such a long time averting his eyes from their looming branches.*

*The dense mat of clouds which had been hanging over the building since their arrival had finally begun to dissipate. To his amazement, when Basil squinted through the window and poked his gaze through the remaining clouds... he almost thought he could see the stars. Trillions of tiny lights, shining silently through the vast emptiness.*

*And alongside those trillions of stars, one quiet, familiar moon floated overhead.*

...

# Words Unspoken

Chapter Notes

Brief update. Dual POVs this chapter. Thank you for the comments. Have a nice week.

*Polly stared at the full moon flying over her head as it floated listlessly above the remaining clouds.*

But in spite of the glow it created, this particular night still felt almost unnaturally dark... though Polly herself couldn't quite justify why that was the case. Even still, the looming shadows swallowed everything.

The garden before her sat untouched and untended. It had been staying alive using the recent rainstorms that had passed across Faraway, but their garden was nonetheless bereft of its typical care. The bushes and brambles had begun to escape their typical positions and take root amongst the vegetable patch, which was itself engaging in a longstanding battle over the remaining planter space. Each floral species was fighting to try and claim as much room as possible for itself, thus the weaker plants had begun to slowly choke out and die under the constant pressure.

*Without their herbal ruler keeping order over them, this garden's denizens had begun to viciously cannibalize each other.*

Polly watched as a singular firefly momentarily breached through the peak of the tallest rosebush, but it quickly disappeared into the distance, leaving nothing behind. The caretaker tried to shake herself from her thoughts, finally standing up. Dinner had been overdue for a long time, but Polly seemingly could not bring herself to desire it.

Nevertheless, she got up from the overturned pot she'd been resting upon and stepped back towards the house. She opened the door and placed herself inside an even deeper darkness.

The lights inside the house had all remained off, as there was currently no one else inside. Polly drifted through the shadows and made her way back into the kitchen.

Polly stepped through the doorway and gazed towards the refrigerator. She knew exactly what could be found inside (having stocked it herself) but even the small luxuries she had purchased for her own comfort seemed unappetizing now.

So Polly stepped past the kitchen and towards the dinner table, only stopping momentarily to shuffle the previously strewn-out polaroids into a small stack that she then left unattended.

She drifted towards the front door and opened it, stepping outside. Polly thought that she might acquire a meager appetite if she went for a brief walk around the neighborhood... *even if the effort itself felt a bit forced.*

*Their street was unusually silent. No cars passed by. Polly slowly realized that she didn't actually know what time it was, but she had left her phone behind either way. Her mind was similarly abandoned elsewhere.*

Polly drifted to the intersection past the trees and took a right, stepping towards the park. A gentle breeze attempted to curl the ends of her hair.

*She had only turned for a brief moment before something in the distance suddenly stole her attention.*

There was a group of flashing lights sparkling ahead, accompanied by a few faint voices. The lights flickered various colors, briefly lighting up the opposing sidewalk just before it curved alongside the edge of the second intersection. It almost appeared as if someone was lighting fireworks.

Polly continued walking down the road, listlessly gazing at the strange lights ahead of her. She kept staring at them until she felt she could identify their origin.

A few of the faint voices became muffled by a sudden crackling sound as the light momentarily increased. It **was** fireworks. A group of teens were seemingly poking around with sparklers at the street corner. Their voices grew louder as Polly approached, several silhouettes slowly becoming visible via the surrounding flames.

"**Ack!** It popped again!" One boy complained. *"Why did you have to give me this one?"*

"**Shut up!**" A girl's voice retorted. "The popping ones are like the coolest ones!! Be grateful!!"

"What is cool about th- **yeesh**!" The boy's sparkler seemingly went off again.

"You must channel the essence of the flame, my pupil." Another boy spoke. "Only then will the darkness within you finally be illuminat- **HEY**!! Watch where you're pointing that thing!!"

*The second boy recoiled as the first tried to hold the sizable sparkler away from his own body, that momentary panic suddenly placing his friend's blonde hair into proximity of its most-ambitious embers.*

"**BAHAHA!!**" The girl laughed. "That's what you get for talking like such a ner- ***ANGEL GET OFF OF ME!!***"

"Come on, Kim!" The first boy begged, grabbing at the girl's jacket while trying his best to hold the sparkler in the opposite direction. "If you like these ones so much then just trade with me!"

"What?? No way!!" The girl protested. "Yours is already half-out anyway! Just quit whining and wait until its over!!"

"But I'm s-scared!!"

The girl loudly exhaled. "**CHARLIE!!**"

*The largest figure suddenly stood up from the curb, brandishing some sort of plastic weapon in their hands. The boy with the loudest sparkler yelped in distress as his associate began to blast him with a water gun. The problematic sparkler was promptly extinguished, but his clothes also appeared to suffer a significant drenching from the liquid assault. His friend's assistance left him soaked and dripping across the asphalt.*

"Ah geez... makes it look like I pissed myself..." The first boy complained, dragging his feet back to the sidewalk. "You need to work on your aim, Charlie..."

*"Oops... s-sorry..."* The large girl apologized and sat back down again. The boy beside her pulled a sucker out of his mouth and laughed hysterically at his friend's misfortune.

"Maybe sparklers are just a bit too much for you, Angel." The third boy posited, placing the candy back onto his tongue.

"Pfft!" Angel scoffed. "Y-Yeah right. I just need one that isn't so LOUD..."

*The boy picked up another sparkler and a lighter as he spoke, placing the two together with trembling hands while he showboated for his friends.*

"Careful... you want to make sure you're lighting it right at the tip." Polly advised.

"Okay, thank- ***AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!!!"*** Angel tripped over the edge of the curb as soon as he realized Polly was standing behind him. The boy fell over, losing grasp on the lighter as he toppled back onto the asphalt.

"S-Sorry!" Polly apologized. "Are you alright?"

*Polly reached down and picked up the lighter, then bent over to offer the boy a hand up. Angel seemed to try and speak as she grabbed his arm, but his vocalization sounded much more like a distressed wheeze. The boy with the candy howled with laughter again.*

"Geez lady, you really scared the hell out of him." The girl with the glasses scratched the back of her head.

"I, The Maverick, nearly had a heart attack." The blonde boy exhaled in relief, pressing the last of his sparkler into the concrete. "And The Maverick is not faint of-"

"Let me guess, we need to stop bothering people with fireworks because it's past our bedtime." The girl with the glasses sighed and ignored her friend, looking away from their unexpected visitor.

"Oh, um *no..."* Polly denied, shaking her head. "It's not really any of my business... I just wanted to thank you for your help before." Polly turned back to Angel as the shortest boy finished standing himself up.

"Uh, that's not... *I mean, sure."* Angel mumbled under his breath. The girl with the glasses raised her eyebrows.

"What the heck does that mean, Angel?" The boy with the candy objected. "You becoming some kind of snitch on us?"

"**No**! I didn't even... *I only gave her directions..."* Angel objected, trailing off.

"Yes, I've lived in Faraway for several years now, but I still feel hopelessly out of place from time-to-time." Polly agreed, smiling to herself. "I hope that its not a sign I'm getting older."

"Well... you don't **look** old." The boy with the blonde hair reassured her. The girl with the glasses shot him a look.

*"... What?"* He objected.

Polly smiled again, holding back a small laugh.

*There was a brief moment of silence.*

...

"You all are Aubrey's friends, correct?" Polly asked.

"Yeah. What about it?" The girl with the glasses confirmed, somewhat agitated. Her friends turned to view her for a moment.

...

"Umm... **yes**." Angel spoke up. "But Aubrey isn't in town right now-"

*"Yeah."* The girl with the glasses cut him off, exhaling. "Aubrey's not here. She already knows that."

"Huh? *She does?"*

"**Yes**. She was the one who let Aubrey's old friends borrow her car in the first place."

"Huh?" Angel made a dumbfounded expression. "Wait... **really**?"

"Ahem... y-yes." Polly confirmed, suddenly feeling more than a bit embarrassed of herself. "They did not inform me that they ended up telling anyone else." She swallowed.

"Oh." The girl with the glasses suddenly sat up straight as if remembering something. "*Oops*. Uh... *well, whatever."* She shrugged it off and slouched back down again. "It's not like anyone here would nark on Aubrey anyway."

"And if they did I'd just kick their ass." The girl raised her voice slightly, seemingly to underline the threat.

...

*There was another momentary silence.*

...

*Polly was just about to excuse herself, but the girl in the glasses spoke up once more.*

"Hey, do you want to light some snakes with us?" She asked.

*"Snakes?"* Polly mirrored.

"Yeah, I've got a whole bunch of em." The girl confirmed. "Most people say they're lame, but I think they can be kind of fun if you burn them all at once. Sort of ends up looking like a weird octopus sometimes." She grinned.

*Polly smiled and watched as the girl threw a box of novelty fireworks away from the curb and onto the asphalt.*

"Angel, take this and go light that." She handed the youngest boy a sparkler that burnt with a short green flame, gesturing that he take it and use it to incinerate the box in the road.

Angel took the sparkler with a bit more hesitance this time, then approached the box with his new torch in hand. He held the flame downwards for a moment, but backed away once the *"snakes"* began emerging.

*Polly watched with quiet amusement as a grotesque tangle of black carbonate tubes arose from the flaming box in several disjointed masses. Its sudden growth was almost charming, in a hideous kind of way. Polly took a seat on the curb.*

"What do you think they taste like?" The boy with the facial hair pondered aloud.

"You're an idiot." The girl in the glasses berated him.

*The hissing of the snakes continued uninterrupted for several more seconds. Each time Polly thought that it had finally burned itself out, the absurd blob of ashes only started up once more.*

"So why did you let a bunch of dumb teenagers take your car, anyway?" The girl with the glasses asked, still staring into the fire ahead of her. "Are you like... friends with Kel's family or whatever?"

"Ah... *no."* Polly denied, quietly thumbing at the bracelet around her wrist. "I can't say that I am."

"So did they just pay you for it or what?"

*Polly shook her head.* "Well... they wanted to go on a trip to honor their friend who had passed. Someone who was important to them."

*"Mari."* The girl replied.

"Yes. I know she was... *important* to Basil, too." Polly stared at the moonlight reflecting across the asphalt.

"I suppose I was partial to their cause." She thought aloud.

...

"And it wasn't as if that car was being driven either way." Polly finished.

*There was another moment of silence. Polly hadn't noticed, but it seemed as if the entire group had been listening to her rather intently. A few of them awkwardly fidgeted in place.*

"You're kind of... ***weird***. For an adult, I mean. No offense." The girl with the glasses posited.

Polly felt a slight smile tug at the corner of her lip. *"Am I?"*

"Yeah. I don't think most people would bother involving themselves in something like that." The girl with the glasses flicked a lighter on and off in her hands.

...

"Sorry." Polly apologized. "I should have thought to ask. *Did you know her?"*

"Know who?"

"Mari."

*"Ehh..."* The girl in the glasses scratched at the back of her head. "Not really. We never talked or whatever."

"She was pretty cool, though. The girl continued. "Not as cool as Aubrey, but y'know... *cool."*

...

"I wish I did know her." She started again. "So I could understand why everyone is still so beat up about her after all these years."

"Um... *sorry."* The girl apologized, though Polly was unsure who it was directed to. "That didn't really come out right."

...

"I just... could never really see exactly where Aubrey was coming from, since I didn't know her like she did." The girl started again.

"It's hard to help someone with something like that when it never really involved you, I guess." The girl finished.

...

*"Well..."* Polly thought aloud. "I think that still wanting to help them is worth something, even if it doesn't involve you. I think you should be proud that you try to help your friends through tough things like that, even if it doesn't always amount to much."

The girl let out a tiny scoff, smirking slightly. *"Yeah, sure.* If you say so."

...

"I'm Kim, by the way." The girl in the glasses elaborated, holding out a hand. "Sorry, but I forgot what your name was. Like... *Pauline,* or whatever?"

*"Polly."* Polly smiled and shook the girl's hand.

"Ahh... I gotcha. Well ma'am, any friend of Aubrey's is a friend of ours." Kim expressed. "That's how it works around here."

*"These are the hooligans!"* Kim elaborated. "The tall one is Charlie, the loud one is Mikhael, The hairy one is my brother Vance... and I guess you already met Angel."

*"H-Hello..."*
"Yo, what up!"
"Actually, I believe I have instructed you **MULTIPLE TIMES** to refer to me as **THE MAVER-**"
*"Wearing these wet shorts feels g-gross..."*

*"Shut up."* Kim scratched her nose and demanded that Aubrey's entourage silence themselves.

...

*"So..."* Kim started again, seemingly lost in thought. "Did that nerd Hero ever promise to pay you back for jacking your ride? He seems like he'd be really easy to shake down if you wanted to."

Polly smirked and stifled a laugh. "No... I can't say that he did. But I would consider it an act of charity either way. College students definitely need to save as much money as they can."

*"Wow!"* Kim faked a sense of amazement. "That's so gracious of you, ma'am!"

"So since we're friends now, can **I** borrow your car next?" She nudged Polly's arm.

"Hmm..." Polly tapped on her chin with her finger. *"I'm not sure.* Do you have any references?"

"My dad can tell you that I haven't gotten myself arrested yet. Does that count?" Kim joked.

"I suppose that counts for something."

...

*The dialogue died down again. Polly watched alongside Aubrey's friends as the last of the black snake box finally began to stop smoldering.*

*The remaining cardboard fragments had been pushed upward by the bloated spire of snakes and were seemingly attempting to float off into the air. The girl with the water gun manually extinguished them from a distance. The blob of burnt snake gently collapsed in on itself. Their street corner returned to darkness.*

...

"I'm like... sorry that Basil disappeared. I know that must... *suck bad."* Kim mumbled. The rest of her group seemed to awkwardly readjust themselves.

"Mm." Polly hummed to herself, lost in thought.

...

*"Well...* I always knew that my time with Basil wasn't going to last forever, I just never thought it was going to end like... *this."* She noted.

...

"I mean... it hasn't been **that** long, right? It's not like we know if they're never..." Kim trailed off.

"Yes. You're right." Polly agreed. "It's far too soon to lose hope."

...

*Polly listened as the wind suddenly ruffled through the trees behind them.*

...

"My job is kind of strange." She thought aloud.

"Uh... *your job?"*

"Yes. As a caretaker, you are supposed to do your best to care for other people, but your ultimate desire is always that one day they won't need you anymore."

"You want them to get better so that they can stand on their own two feet, even if that means that you'll no longer have a place in their life." She explained.

"It was my job to take care of Basil, but I had always hoped that one day him and me would get to share a pleasant goodbye." Polly thought aloud. "I had hoped that when that day finally came... Basil would have a smile on his face."

*A somber silence reasserted itself over Polly's listeners. Polly noted that Kim had taken off her glasses at some point during her ramble, and was now quietly fiddling with the hinges.*

...

"I never really thought anything particularly bad about Basil... *but Aubrey did."* Kim noted. "And because we were friends with Aubrey and not friends with him, we kind of..." She trailed off.

...

*"I mean...* I always knew that there was more between the two of them than Aubrey really told us, but I had figured that if she had beef with Basil, then it must have been serious stuff." Kim elaborated. "And since I knew that it had to be serious, I always chose to believe Aubrey whenever she said anything about Basil that... wasn't very good."

"There's nothing wrong with wanting to stand by your friends." Polly let out a sad smile.

"Yeah but... now I wonder how much of that stuff was really true." Kim continued. "And after everything that happened, I can't help but feel like maybe part of this is like... **our** fault."

*"Mm."* Polly thought to herself.

...

"I suppose you'll all just have to apologize to him when he comes back, then." She decided. Kim's group quietly mumbled amongst themselves.

...

"That sounds alright by me." The boy with the facial hair suddenly spoke up, grinning. "Kim sucks at apologies, though."

Kim elbowed her brother in the ribcage. "Up yours."

...

*"So...* did Aubrey mention to you when she might be coming back?" Angel inquired, poking his fingers together.

"No... I can't say that she did." Polly denied. "But I know that the three of them should be back here sooner rather than later." She reassured him.

"Oh, well... *that's cool."* Angel expressed, scratching the side of his face. "So do you want to light a sparkler with us?"

Polly smiled and suppressed a laugh. *"If you have one to spare."*

*Angel awkwardly lit a small sparkler and handed it to Polly before walking away again.*

*Polly watched as the tiny fire in her hands slowly fizzled and burnt down in a relentless barrage of color, doing its best to momentarily entertain her and remove her mind from all of the pointless suffering in this world. Kim spoke up again as the flame continued diminishing.*

"I guess I just wish I could have asked Basil a few things while he was still here." She stated. "You know... asked what was really up between him and Aubrey or whatever."

Polly stared at the swirl of sparks quickly flying away from her hands. "I suppose that's the trouble with holding your tongue around the people you care about."

"Sometimes you mean to ask people certain things, or tell them certain things... but because its so hard to do, you always put it off." Polly thought aloud. "Over and over again."

"Then, one day... you suddenly realize you can no longer tell them anything at all."

...

*Hearing the words that left her mouth, Polly immediately felt ashamed of herself. None of this conversation had been particularly appropriate to be sharing with a group of random schoolkids. In all honesty, she should have excused herself a long while ago.*

*And yet in spite of that selfishness and embarrassment, Polly still couldn't bring herself to apologize, or lift a finger to break the silence that she had created. All she could manage to do was continue staring at the sparkler in her hands as it slowly burnt itself out.*

...

"I gotta go." Kim suddenly stood up. The rest of the crowd looked on in silence as she quickly stepped away from the colorful flame and disappeared somewhere further down the darkened pavement.

*Polly's sparkler finally died, leaving only a glowing orange tip behind.*

...

"I know w-what you mean..." The large girl suddenly spoke up. "After m-my uncle died, all I c-could think about w-were all the things I n-never shared with him. I h-hated myself f-for it..."

"I'm so sorry for your loss." Polly briefly bowed her head. "I know how hard that can be."

...

"Well... don't feel bad, you two!" Angel stood up, trying to raise his voice. *"Um, because...* **look at that up there!**"

*Polly craned her neck to stare up towards whatever the boy was pointing at. All she could see was the same old moon, hemmed in by a few glimmering stars that gingerly poked their way through the clouds.*

"My sister says that bad stuff doesn't happen when the full moon is out." Angel claimed. "She says that it covers us in its positive aura or whatever... and that gives us good luck so that only good things can happen!"

*Polly tried to force a smile, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. She looked back down and watched as the tiny ember in her hands slowly died out and fell to the ground.*

"Well... I certainly hope that's true."

Sunny’s heartbeat resumed... ***and began to quickly escalate out of his control***.

"Basil?” Sunny spoke his friend's name into the darkness, hoping that he would hear the other boy respond from the display bathroom beside him. No such luck.

Sunny immediately felt the bedsheets begin to squirm around him as if coming to life. The fabric which covered his body slowly began to disintegrate as a feeling of indescribable panic shot down his spine.

The sudden surge of absolute terror completely blotted out every other feeling in his body. Waves of hallucinatory legs instantly crawled in cascades across his skin, but Sunny was too horrified to even react.

**Huh?** ***Huh?***
***Where is Basil?***

*"Basil?"* Sunny called into the darkness again, quickly standing up. The fear inside him continued to build with a vicious fervor. Sunny felt dizzy the moment that his feet hit the floor.

But despite Sunny’s quickly-growing desperation, the shadows around him yielded no response. This display room was entirely devoid of life.

Sunny began to scramble back towards the lobby. As he moved closer to the door, Sunny caught notice that both the army knife he'd found in the office and the serrated knife Basil hid earlier had been left abandoned on the blonde's side table. Sunny quickly grabbed the larger of the two weapons and continued out of the room.

As he pushed through the door, the extent of Sunny's terror only became increasingly insurmountable. Each wall, floor tile, and doorway began to crawl with tiny black specks which sprouted from the corners of his vision. Sunny was haunted by skittering creatures once again, but this time he didn't even care enough to take notice of his own delusions. The hallucinations which haunted him were far less frightening than his horrifying new reality.

*"**Basil**?"* Sunny cried out again. His voice echoed down the hall.

Sunny put his hand on the wall to steady himself once again. Shaking with fear, he continued traveling back towards the front of the building. Seemingly trapped by his own dread, Sunny attempted to calm himself by considering his current situation as calmly and rationally as possible.

The most likely explanation was simply that Basil had decided to go to the bathroom by himself, and that he'd failed to inform Sunny beforehand as to avoid waking his friend up. Basil was just polite like that.

It was not in Basil's nature to intentionally draw attention to himself… *even when directly instructed to.*

Sunny exhaled as he continued creeping down the hall. Until his hopeful conclusion had been proven false, Sunny decided that he would not allow himself to panic any further.

There was no point in succumbing to the horror, as doing so would change nothing. Basil had been fine every other time. Basil was still fine now. Everything was going to be better now.

Sunny continued creeping forward, nearly making it into the lobby before pausing briefly as the thought crept back into his head.

'**It's right down the hall**.'

***It** was right down the hall? What did **it** mean? **Basil**? Basil was at the end of the hall? A monster that stole him away?*

Sunny crept through the double doors at the lobby's exit. The pair had left them propped open earlier as to make travel back and forth from the bathroom as effortless as possible.

Upon reaching the doorway, Sunny slowed down. He began gently sneaking forward. Sunny was unsure as to exactly why the sudden impulse had struck him, but he began to move forward as stealthily as possible.

However, all it took was a brief moment of examination to see that the lobby was just as lifeless and empty as it always had been. Ignoring that emptiness, Sunny tried to shake off his fear again. He began to move more quickly towards the windowed hall at the front of the building.

Sunny considered calling out Basil's name once more, but he rationalized that doing so would likely frighten his friend if the blonde was currently still in the bathroom.

*And he **was** in the bathroom. Basil was there.*

So, whether out of empathy or fear, Sunny kept his mouth shut. The little one-eyed creature finally reached the bathroom door and gave it two soft taps with the back of his hand.

"**Basil?** Are you in there?"

…

*And yet, Sunny's worst fears were finally brought to reality. The door spoke nothing in return.*

Sunny pushed his way through and checked again to be absolutely sure. With trembling arms, he crouched to the floor so that he could peer into each stall at the same time. No unconscious friends revealed themselves.

Sunny then returned to the hall and checked the opposing bathroom, stumbling through the second door in a panic. ***Empty***.

*Sunny could barely even remember how the motion was formed anymore, but he began to **run**. His legs felt like dead weights. Sunny ran down the hallway as the flooring tilted and swayed beneath him. He didn't have any idea where he was going, but he needed to get there **now**.*

*Sunny stumbled back through the office door. He checked every chair in every room for any sign of a restless blonde who might have accidentally fallen asleep elsewhere.*

*No such person revealed themselves.*

*Sunny fell over multiple times while climbing the stairs upward, but his momentum only continued building. Every cubicle was checked and every door opened, but there were no lost friends wandering alone in any of the countless empty spaces.*

*Sunny growled with frustration and stumbled back down the stairs once more, tripping over himself. His hands began to shake uncontrollably. Sunny attempted to quickly look everywhere a second time on his way out, nearly smashing himself into the office door as he burst back into the windowed hall at the front of the building.*

*Sunny's breath became ragged. He hadn't moved his body like this in longer than he'd possibly be able to remember. Sunny cursed the pounding in his skull as he struggled to even walk or breathe.*

*Sunny felt it all coming together to suffocate him. He'd finally gone completely insane. Maybe Basil was never even here in the first place. Maybe everything around him had been made out of pure delusion all along.*

*It was all just another hellish mirage. Every second since awakening in the hospital had been nothing more than yet another horrible nightmare as his real body lingered in a permanently-comatose state.*

***As punishment for his sins, Sunny had been cursed to remain in his own skull forever, and even the feeling of Basil's skin had been nothing but one more in a long list of disgusting, self-indulgent fabrications**.*

***This was it.***

*Sunny blinks, and he is on the floor again. He doesn't even remember falling down this time. His vision continues to blur. The countless chittering arachnids on the ground struggle to reclaim him in exactly the same manner as before.*

*Sunny's body grows heavy as he strains to push himself back up off the ground. He tries over and over but somehow fails even more miserably with each subsequent attempt. Every time he starts to believe he'll be able to get a knee up, he slips back to the floor all over again. By the third attempt, a terrible sense of reality begins to set in. He wasn't getting up this time.* ***Basil was gone, and Sunny couldn't even move.***

*For what might have been seconds, or minutes, or hours…* ***that fact was all that existed****. The fear became so overwhelming that Sunny eventually lost track of his own mind.*

**In the end, everything vanished under the weight of one final nightmare**.

*But in Sunny's darkest moment, one more unfathomable vision appears before him. He watches the brief flash of someone's arm swinging back and forth as the stranger stepped into the lobby alone.*

Basil?

*Sunny's heart nearly stopped again, but he still managed to find the will to stand up using his sudden rush of adrenaline. He quickly scrambled back towards the lobby's entrance and glanced inside, attempting to obscure himself while doing so. Sunny watched in terror as a human figure calmly walked towards the display hall.*

...

*Upon recognizing the person in the lobby, Sunny wasn't exactly sure how to feel. He had been worried that the person would end up being some kind of dangerous criminal... but upon a closer glance, Sunny quickly realized that they weren't really a person at all.*

***To put it simply, the stranger in the lobby was not real.*** *Sunny might have truly gone insane, but even he could recognize the point at which his hallucinations were far too absurd to remain congruent with the world around him. If any of this was real at all, then Sunny could take solace in the absolute certainty that the person ahead of him was fake.*

*But in a way, seeing something undeniably imaginary was strangely comforting during a moment like this. Even if Sunny couldn't be entirely sure what was true, he could still derive a semblance of sanity from determining what was definitively nonexistent.*

*But in spite of that brief moment of clarity, Sunny still felt the need to push himself forward. It was usually when Sunny drew closer to his hallucinations that they would finally disappear, but he nonetheless found himself incapable of resisting his sudden urge to step towards the lone figure.*

*And to Sunny's absolute terror, the illusion quickly rotated to greet him. Hero's eyes widened the exact moment they caught notice of his approach.*

"**Omori!**"

*Sunny violently flinched in surprise as the hallucination suddenly spoke to him.*

Hero let out a tired laugh. "I've been looking everywhere for you! You really need to stop wandering off like that. Mari about had a panic attack this time."

*Talking. It was **talking**.*

"Speaking of... you haven't happened to see Kel or Aubrey around here, have you? I haven't managed to find the two of them, either."

*Sunny felt like he was going to scream.*

*Hero bent down slightly to view his companion face-to-face. Sunny's friend let out a guilty smirk.*

"Don't tell anyone else I said this, but I'll admit that I've been a little bit more worried about Aubrey and Kel than I've been about you. I know that you can take care of yourself, right? *I'm just a little less sure about the two of them..."*

"They're both not quite as... 'composed', you know? Even if Aubrey and Kel got lost together, I'm not sure if they'd even have the sense to stay in a group." Hero rubbed at his neck.

...

"Hey, are you alright? You seem a little out of it right now." Hero remarked, suddenly frowning.

...

"I'm... f-fine." Sunny denied. "I haven't s-seen Kel or Aubrey. Sorry... *Hero.*"

Hero sighed. "Oh well. I'm sure that they're okay, wherever they are."

"..."

"So how about you?" Hero inquired. "Have you been doing alright by yourself?"

"Oh, um... I..." Sunny trailed off.

*The hallucinatory Hero continued staring at him.*

"I've been fine." Sunny stated. "I wasn't by m-myself, anyway. I've been with Basil."

Hero's brow tilted. *"Who?"*

...

"Um... *nevermind."* Sunny retracted.

Sunny's friend stretched his arms. "Well in any case, do you want to lead the way?" Hero asked. "You probably know this strange place better than I do."

*Sunny's legs twitched.*

"Actually, H-Hero... do you mind if the two of us stay s-split up for a bit?"

*"Huh?"* Hero scratched his head. "Wait, seriously?"

...

"I... don't think that's a good idea, Omori. Mari would kill me if she found out that I let you keep wandering around by yourself."

...

"Could you maybe... keep it a secret between the two of us, then?" Sunny requested.

*"Really?"*

"Yeah." Sunny confirmed.

*Hero stared at him.*

...

"And you're sure?"

"It's... *important."*

"Alright then." Hero smiled. "I trust you. Just don't rat me out, okay?"

Sunny shook his head. "Thanks, Hero."

*Hero nodded and stood back up again.*

...

"You know... I think you might have gotten taller, recently." Hero noted.

"Maybe just a little." Sunny denied.

"Well... I'll meet up with you later then. Don't spend too much time by yourself." Hero requested.

"I won't. I promise."

*Hero waved and began to walk away. Sunny watched as the display hall ahead of him began to pulsate with a growing shadow. The massive pool of blackness seemed to swallow up the walls and completely-erase the floor tiles, but Hero did not hesitate or change his path at all. He simply took a few more steps forward and quickly disappeared into the darkness before him. Sunny then watched in disbelief as the shadow steadily absorbed every doorway in the hall within a matter of seconds. He barely had time to react before something tried to reach out of the blackness and grab his arm.*

*Sunny fell to the ground in a panic, only to feel the the weight of the shadow immediately overwhelm him.*

***Sunny opened his eyes**. He was lying facedown on the floor in the windowed hall. He must have passed out at some point while he was dashing around like an idiot.*

*It was no wonder that Hero had spoken to him, then. That was all just another dream. A nightmare.*

*Sunny took a moment to force himself back to his feet, but there was still no sign of Basil anywhere. Other than the soft sound of the wind brushing against the glass, the building was*

*painfully silent. Just as empty as it had ever been.*

*Sunny straightened his back and tried to hold his balance. To his surprise, he found it to be a bit easier than before. Sunny didn't fall back over again. Despite his situation having remained unchanged, Sunny now felt a strange sense of calmness pass over him.*

*But alongside that temporary tranquility came a slight **itch**. Sunny found something new lingering inside the back of his head, though he didn't entirely understand why. Regardless, that tiny itch demanded he lift his legs again.*

*Sunny slowly walked back down the windowed hall and returned to the lobby. He marched in silence until he finally reached the exact tile where Hero had been standing in his dream. Sunny stared down into the display hall. It was empty.*

*Yet for some reason... Sunny couldn't shake the feeling that the hall was staring back at him.*

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